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**Romantic Dialogues:  
Writing the Self in De Quincey and Woolf**

by Hsiu-yu Chen

A thesis submitted at Durham University for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Department of English Studies

Durham University

2013

## **Declarations**

I declare that the research and writing in this thesis were carried out by myself in the Department of English Studies, Durham University, under the supervision of Dr. Mark Sandy and Professor Patricia Waugh. This thesis has been composed by myself and is a record of work that has not been submitted previously for a higher degree.

Hsiu-yu Chen

I certify that the work represented in this thesis has been performed by Hsiu-yu Chen, who, during the period of study, has fulfilled the conditions of the Ordinance and Regulations governing the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

Professor Patricia Waugh

Dr. Mark Sandy

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## **Abstract**

Virginia Woolf has been recognised as a pioneering modernist writer creating a new literary voice. It is not unusual to discover in Woolf's writings the aesthetic and literary traces of those past traditions and influences which have been woven into her modern narratives. One significant, but often overlooked, influence comes from the Romantic period and the essayist, Thomas De Quincey. De Quincey's stylish essays inspire Woolf's art. Both writers' fascination with representing the self (and their devotion to creating a literary thinking about, and narrative of, the subject) indicates a shared affinity between these two writers in spite of important cultural, historical, and social differences between them. My treatment of the self in De Quincey and Woolf is aware of the aesthetic and literary affinities between them and those cultural and historical differences that divide them. Tracing important connections between these two important writers sheds light on the larger concerns and patterns of both the literary scenes of Romanticism and Modernism.

Six chapters in three sections focus on three main aspects of the self central to De Quincey and Woolf—the art of literature, the representation of time and the question of autobiographical writing. Chapter One and Two investigate De Quincey's literature of power and Woolf's art of fiction to examine the relationship between literary representation and the self. Chapter Three and Four discuss issues of time and self in De Quincey and Woolf. The final two chapters contend that De Quincey's and Woolf's reflections on literary representation, and time as a philosophical problem are embodied in their writings of the self across their respective literary careers. A project of this kind is alert to and enriches a recent burgeoning critical interest from Romanticists and Modernists alike in the exchanges, interchanges, bequests, and legacies of Romanticism to Modernism.

## **Contents**

<i>Acknowledgement</i>	v
<i>List of Abbreviations</i>	vi
<b>Introduction</b>	1
“Impassioned Prose”	2
“De Quincey’s Autobiography”	5
“The English Mail Coach”	8
De Quincey and the Critics	10
Woolf and Romanticism	15
De Quincey and Woolf	18
 <b>Part I</b>	
 <b>Chapter One:</b>	
<b>De Quincey’s Vital Emphasis: The Literature of Power as Fine Art</b>	28
De Quincey as a Critic	31
De Quincey’s Formulation between Power and Knowledge	33
The Power Bestowed and the Power Called Forth	37
A Revolt against Genre Differentiation and the Choice of Autobiography	45
Murder: The Dark Genre of Fine Art	50
Sympathy of Understanding	54
The Kantian Sublime and Disinterestedness	58
The Moments of Revelation	60
 <b>Chapter Two:</b>	
<b>Woolf’s Art of Fiction</b>	65
De Quincey’s “Impassioned Prose”	66
Modernity and the End of Realism	75
For and Against Psychology	82
Woolf’s Artistic Manoeuvres	87
Women and Fiction	93
The Art of Fiction	97

## **Part II**

### **Chapter Three:**

<b>Aspects of the Self and Time in De Quincey</b>	100
Saint Augustine's Time Consciousness	101
Romantic Consciousness of Time	103
Coleridge's "Frost at Midnight"	104
Wordsworth's Spots of Time	108
Nature and Shelley's Idealised History	113
The Opium-Eater and His Confessions	118
De Quincey's Denial of Clock Time	120
The Palimpsest and the Human Mind	123
Time in Dreams and Death	129
Self and Moments of Sublimity	134

### **Chapter Four:**

<b>Virginia Woolf's Interpretation of Time</b>	139
The Nature of Reality	141
Between Historical and Personal	148
Women's Time	151
Time and Mind	153
The Bergsonian Time	158
Moments of Being	162
Art and the Past	165

## **Part III**

### **Chapter Five:**

<b>Representing the Self in the Ambiguous Genre of Autobiography and De Quincey's Writings</b>	171
The Ambiguous Genre of Autobiography	174
A Contractual Agreement	178
The Art of Confession	183
De Quincey's Autobiographical Writings	186
De Quincey's Split Self in Writing	190
The Self is a Subjective Construction	194
The Fascinating Mind	198

Damasio's Answer to De Quincey's Dilemma	205
<b>Chapter Six:</b>	
<b>Woolf's Literary Journey of Writing the Self</b>	210
A Covert Autobiographer	212
<i>Night and Day</i> and the Break from the Past	213
<i>Orlando</i> and the New Biography	218
Androgyny Disarms Dualism	225
Woolf and the "Captain Self"	230
Autobiography and the Novel	234
Sketch of the Past	237
<b>Conclusion</b>	242
<b>Bibliography</b>	248

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獻給我的爸媽，感謝他們的支持。



## List of Abbreviations

### *Abbreviations of Frequently Cited Primary Sources:*

#### Thomas De Quincey (1785-1859)

<i>COE</i>	<i>The Confession of an English Opium-Eater</i> (1821)
<i>KGM</i>	<i>On the Knocking at the Gate in Macbeth</i> (1823)
<i>MFA</i>	<i>On Murder Considered as One of the Fine Arts</i> (1827)
<i>RLP</i>	<i>Recollections of the Lake and the Lake Poets</i> (1834-1840)
<i>SP</i>	<i>Suspiria de Profundis</i> (1845)
<i>MC</i>	<i>The English Mail-Coach</i> (1849)

#### Virginia Woolf (1882-1941)

<i>ND</i>	<i>Night and Day</i> (1919)
<i>MD</i>	<i>Mrs. Dalloway</i> (1925)
<i>TTL</i>	<i>To the Lighthouse</i> (1927)
<i>OL</i>	<i>Orlando</i> (1928)
<i>AROO</i>	<i>A Room of One's Own</i> (1929)
<i>DM</i>	<i>The Death of the Moth and Other Essays</i> (1942)
<i>M</i>	<i>The Moment and Other Essays</i> (1948)
<i>CDB</i>	<i>The Captain's Death Bed and Other Essays</i> (1950)
<i>GR</i>	<i>Granite and Rainbow and Other Essays</i> (1958)
<i>WD</i>	<i>A Writer's Diary</i> (1982)
<i>MB</i>	<i>Moments of Being</i> (1985)
<i>HH</i>	<i>A Haunted House: The Complete Shorter Fiction</i> (1985)

## Introduction

Although he has long enjoyed a well-received and wide-ranging literary reputation, De Quincey's influence on later writers has rarely been investigated. Most studies of De Quincey focus on the relationship between De Quincey and his peers. A study of De Quincey's legacies or his potential anticipation of later literary generations is rare. Woolf's two important reviews, "Impassioned Prose" (1926) and "De Quincey's Autobiography" (1932), focus on De Quincey's prose style and his art of autobiography. Woolf extricates De Quincey from the obscurity of the past and brings De Quincey's art into her own era by revisiting his writing through her own Modernist lens. Both reviews are preoccupied with De Quincey's autobiographical writing and their underpinning aesthetic and philosophical assumptions. De Quincey's prose style, his autobiographical obsessions, journeys into the world of dreams and human sensations are, similarly, familiar themes in Woolf's own public and private writings. As a critic of her time, Woolf's reviews of De Quincey conjure this sometimes forgotten and most of the time uncategorised figure of Romanticism and introduced him to a modern audience. However, even though Woolf's reviews of De Quincey are widely recognised, and perhaps helped to inspire a burgeoning interest in his works from the 1960s, a more in depth study of his legacy to Modernist writing has yet to be conducted. This thesis therefore begins the process by focussing on Woolf's reviews of De Quincey to develop an argument concerning his legacy to Woolf and her generation; an examination of this relationship has the potential to shed new light on both the legacies of Romanticism and on Modernist thinking about the literary past and its re-interpretation.

## I.

### “Impassioned Prose”

“Impassioned Prose” was published in 1926 in the *Times Literary Supplement*; the gist of its argument demonstrates how Woolf values De Quincey’s impassioned prose for breaking the conventional separation of prose and poetry. Woolf argues that De Quincey draws on the poetic emphasis on emotion, imagination and inwardness in order to transform the conventional view of prose writing as traditionally concerned with the empirical, didactic purpose and external description. She observes that: “if we examine our choice and give a reason for it, we have to confess that, prose writer though [De Quincey] is, it is for his poetry that we read him and not for his prose.”<sup>1</sup> For Woolf, De Quincey is an eccentric writer who puzzles the critic, the black sheep that refuses to follow everyone else; De Quincey “stand[s] obstinately across the boundary lines, and [does] a greater service by enlarging and fertilising and influencing than by their actual achievement” (*GR*, 34). So unique, for Woolf, is his writing is that De Quincey’s style “made a class for himself” and “widened the choices for others.” (*GR*, 34) On Woolf’s account, new possibilities and experiments are proposed by De Quincey.

As a novelist, Woolf cannot help but admire De Quincey’s capacity for conjuring up the “immense power of language” (*GR*, 34) that equips him so well for the description of visions and dreams. However, De Quincey’s own writing is not without its problems: Woolf draws attention to the issue of his digressiveness, which makes him seem less than a perfect example to novelists: “Most of the time he spreads himself out in a waste of verbosity, where any interest that there may have been peters out dismally and loses itself in the sand.” (*GR*, 36) Refusing to state explicitly that De

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<sup>1</sup> Virginia Woolf, *Granite and Rainbow* (London: Hogarth Press, 1981), 32. Hereafter cited with abbreviation, *GR*.

Quincey is a failed novelist, as he never conceived of himself as a novelist; Woolf recognises other merits in De Quincey's writing. From a more constructive point of view, she writes how "De Quincey can convey character admirably; he is a master of the art of narrative once he succeeded in adjusting the perspective to suit his own eyesight" (*GR*, 36). Placing himself as the subject of his writing allowed "him all possible freedom and yet possess[ed] enough emotional warmth" (*GR*, 37); Woolf is convinced that autobiography is De Quincey's creative destiny. Reading De Quincey's autobiographies, Woolf praises the fact that: "given his own memories to work upon, he can exercise his extraordinary powers of description" and under the spell of his mastery of words, "Scenes come together under his hands like congregations of clouds which gently join and slowly disperse or hang still." (*GR*, 38)

From a reader's point of view, the power of De Quincey's autobiographical writings imprints itself on Woolf, and she remarks: "They have...the strange power of growing in our minds, so that it is always a surprise to come upon them again and see what, in the interval, our minds have done to alter and expand." (*GR*, 38) The magical power of De Quincey's words creates magical feelings in the minds of his readers. The power is both reverberating and resonating. Though one learns very little about factual truths from reading De Quincey's autobiography, one is left with an intimate acquaintance with the mind of De Quincey. De Quincey's writings appeal directly to the feelings and emotions, never to reason or logic. Woolf's imagination is stirred by "descriptions of states of mind in which, often, time is miraculously prolonged and space miraculously expanded" (*GR*, 39) and, consequently, "we cannot help figuring to ourselves, as the rush of eloquence flows, the fragile little body, the fluttering hands, the glowing eyes, the alabaster cheeks, the glass of opium on the table." (*GR*, 39) Perhaps revealing little of a factual nature, De Quincey nevertheless transports his readers to the imagined scene. De Quincey "shifted the values of familiar things" (*GR*,

40) and “this he did in prose” (*GR*, 40) which provides Woolf, as a novelist, helpful direction for depicting her characters and framing her stories. For later prose writers, De Quincey not only widens the choices of style, he also elevates the depth of depiction by “ventur[ing] into those shadowy regions” (*GR*, 40) of the human mind. This human mind is foregrounded in De Quincey’s writings and his capacity to evoke states of mind is the point at which Woolf is most acutely conscious of the significance of De Quincey’s reception and effect of reading his work on her own. De Quincey’s writing is not about education, it is about revelation.

In the review of De Quincey’s prose style, Woolf points out several key points that she is concerned with herself as a modern novelist. Breaking the boundary between prose and poetry requires the fusion of these two genres; De Quincey’s writings are able to deliver poetic elements in the style of prose and his achievements in combining the virtues of each—the artistic sublimation of emotions in poetry and the flexible manoeuvring of language in prose. Such a hybrid style which De Quincey employs in his essays has the potential to be used in novels and differs from modes of Edwardian Realism. De Quincey’s poetic prose is like no other and thus opens up enormous potential for the development of new techniques for prose writing, thereby anticipating and even influencing Woolf’s own modernist experiments. Compared to her Edwardian forefathers who, in Woolf’s eyes, embrace a realistic or materialist approach, De Quincey’s Romantic ideas and practices appear to be more inspirational for Woolf. When Woolf writes that De Quincey is in a class of his own, she has, of course, the same expectation of herself and of Modern novels. Another idea emphasised in De Quincey’s writing, as noted by Woolf, is his skilful depiction of the inner world, which makes him “a born autobiographer.” (*GR*, 37) De Quincey is both the right writer and the right subject for an autobiography; Woolf argues that De Quincey’s autobiographical prose easily renders the kind of subtlety of mind normally

only evoked by poetry. Woolf's emphasis on De Quincey's ability to convey and communicate the inner world reflects her own preoccupation with drawing out the idiosyncrasies of individuals in the portrait of characters. De Quincey's use of prose speaks to Woolf's own anxiety as a modern novelist committed to eschewing the well-worn path trodden by realistic writers who write volume after volume and fail to convey any insightful description of the inner life whatsoever.

### "De Quincey's Autobiography"

De Quincey's art of autobiography anticipates potential paths for modernist novels and resonates with Woolf's own devoted interest in life-writing which, arguably, is where most of the ideas of her novels originate. Several years after "De Quincey's Autobiography" was published (1932) Woolf began her writing of Roger Fry's biography. At the same time, following Vanessa Bell's suggestions, she also began the writing of her own autobiographical "Sketch of the Past". Woolf's life-long interest in the reading and writing of lives gradually matures and condenses into the last stage of her career.

"De Quincey's Autobiography" starts with a discussion of De Quincey's prose style, which has long been neglected by critics of Romanticism, whose emphasis is largely on the poetry.<sup>2</sup> Reasons for the neglect of De Quincey's art, Woolf suggests, resides with the attitude of the writer towards his or her own prose—not the style itself, but the substance that the writer wishes to deliver. The writer must write "as an artist" who has no "practical end in view" (*CR II*, 132); otherwise "he cannot complain of the critics if his writing, like the irritation in the oyster, serves only to breed other art" (*CR II*, 132). However, whereas poetry is seen to be devoted to the

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<sup>2</sup> Virginia Woolf, *The Common Reader II* (London: Vintage, 2003), 132. Hereafter cited in an abbreviated form, *CR II*.

service of artistic sublimation, prose seems always burdened with those practical reasons for writing. However, De Quincey for Woolf “is one of these rare beings” who wishes not “to argue or to convert or even to tell a story” as readers “can draw all our pleasure from the words themselves” (*CR II*, 132) without the need to read between the lines or venture into the motivations of the writer. As autobiographical as De Quincey’s writings are, they maintain an independent artistic completeness standing without necessary dependence on biographical support or interpretation.

The pleasure of De Quincey’s writing is pure and aesthetic, because his writings are composed of “passages of stillness and completeness” which are full of “visions and dreams” (*CR II*, 133). Woolf argues that De Quincey’s writings touch his readers through emotional resonance in the same way as music does: “If we try to analyse our sensations we shall find that we are worked upon as if by music—the senses are stirred rather than the brain.” (*CR II*, 133) In De Quincey’s own writings, “On the Knocking at the Gate in Macbeth” and “On Murder Considered as One of the Fine Arts”, the power of literature to work on the emotions of readers is emphasised; Woolf’s feelings, rather than any cerebral understanding of De Quincey’s writings testify to his achievement in putting the theory of the literature of power into practice. Woolf wishes that her own writings might achieve a similar magical communication that would preserve their artistic integrity: “The emotion is never stated; it is suggested and brought slowly by repeated images before us until it stays, in all its complexity, complete.” (*CR II*, 133-4)

The expressive power of De Quincey’s writings is recognised. With this in mind, Woolf tries to explain why De Quincey was not ranked among the greatest autobiographers in the history of literature. The reason, Woolf suspects, is his superfluity, his over-flowing verbosity. Woolf diagnoses “his fatal verbosity and weakness of architectural power” as accurately as De Quincey grasped the inner life

of characters, claiming that much of his writing lacks structural proportion. And yet there is more than one aspect to the experience of reading De Quincey since his works always create emotional turbulences. As a devoted reader of De Quincey's writing, Woolf herself is "to be out in possession of a meaning of that complex kind which is largely a sensation" (*CR II*, 134) and none of this sensational revelation "could be conveyed by simple words in their logical order; clarity and simplicity would merely travesty and deform such a meaning." (*CR II*, 134) To make her observation more precise, Woolf is convinced that De Quincey's prose has achieved the status and effect of poetry. Woolf sees De Quincey as a different type of autobiographer. Critically reviewing De Quincey's autobiography, Woolf finds that "it has been produced much as a poet like Tennyson would produce it. There is the same care in the use of sounds; the same variety of measure; the length of the sentence is varied and its weight shifted." (*CR II*, 135) Spreading the poetic power in a longer and more diverse genre of prose writing, De Quincey's "power lay in suggesting large and generalised visions" (*CR II*, 135), which Woolf believed more welcomingly appeals to a wider public.

Built upon this power of language and his art in narrative, De Quincey's achievement in autobiography is highly regarded by Woolf. For her, Victorian life-writing is concerned much more with the lives and deeds of great men; unlike autobiographies of this kind, De Quincey "was convinced of the enormous value of candour." (*CR II*, 135) Woolf understands "candour" as the ability to fix one's eyes not only on the external life but also on the internal world of individuals. This change of perspective is critical for both De Quincey and Woolf; the fixation of a primary middle distance lens is replaced by another lens, which is capable of zooming in on individual idiosyncrasies as well as panning out to see the larger context in which individuals exist. Woolf speculates that the origins of this internalised perspective may rest with De Quincey's opium-indulgence and the effects of that habit upon his mental



activities. This self-reflexive point of view indicates for Woolf the quest and search for self-knowledge. Such knowledge provides an anchor for individuals who are surrounded by an impersonal and vertiginously moving outer world. De Quincey's autobiography is full of penetrating self-revelation embedded in the "splendid stars" (*GR*, 32) which, in Woolf's artistic practice, are transformed into the investigation and elaboration of those moments of being.

In the reviews of De Quincey, Woolf discusses De Quincey's prose in the context of his autobiography. For Woolf, De Quincey's artistic style and the subject matter of writing are inseparable. De Quincey is an inspiration, but also a point of departure. In both reviews, Woolf points to De Quincey's "disease" as the ability "to meditate too much and to observe too little" (*GR*, 34; *CR II*, 137). His lack of architectural skill may be less of a concern for an essayist such as De Quincey, but for Woolf, under the influence of modern critics of art such as Roger Fry, consideration of structural form is indispensable. Woolf's reading of De Quincey has been taken up by John Whale who defends De Quincey and argues that the nature of periodical writing left De Quincey and his readers little of the kind of space and time required for the writing and reading of novels.<sup>3</sup> Whale explains that "The impetus supplied in this manner is certainly more abrupt than that operating in a traditionally fictional text" (125). This leads to forced modes of formal adaptation in De Quincey's periodical essays, as "With less space available there is not always time for gradual transition: the reader must be forced along quickly, even if it means breaking up the text" (125).

#### "The English Mail Coach"

Some twenty years before the appearance of these reviews by Woolf, she penned

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<sup>3</sup> John C. Whale, *Thomas De Quincey's Reluctant Autobiography* (London: Croom Helm, 1984), 125.

another often neglected review of “The English Mail Coach”. Published in *The Guardian*, 1906, this review was “identified too late for inclusion in the main text”<sup>4</sup> as its editor clarified. In this earlier review of De Quincey, Woolf tries to define and confront the faults and merits of his writings. She suggests that De Quincey’s writings should be read “in a leisurely mood when time is more than usually irrelevant” and it is even better to “supplement the printed page with draughts of generous sunlight” (366), because De Quincey’s writing is never a factual report but always more of an emotional journey. In this review, Woolf is more conservative about De Quincey’s style and considers the taste for De Quincey’s writing an “immature” one because such taste was “considerably different from our own.” (366) Though Woolf compares De Quincey with Walter Pater and criticises De Quincey for his lack of fine architecture, she also acknowledges at the same time that this particular personal style of De Quincey could serve very well his own art of writing: “Or did not his fault of speech result from causes far too deeply seated and too intimately connected with his virtues to be drilled into good behaviour...?” (366) Woolf finds it hard to pin down the qualities of De Quincey’s writing; his writing often “both irritates and fascinates her”.<sup>5</sup>

Woolf identifies in De Quincey’s writing the flow of music, and this has long been embedded in her view of De Quincey before she turns her attention (in later reviews) to his prose style and autobiography:

...there is an obvious relation between De Quincey’s use of language and a musician’s use of sound; and the sounds which he delights in most are those that suggest vast dimly lighted places, solemn and mysterious, like those ancient cathedrals where the organ speaks with appropriate voice. (367)

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<sup>4</sup> Virginia Woolf, *The Essays of Virginia Woolf: Vol. 1, 1904-1912*, ed. by Andrew McNeillie (Orlando, Florida: Harcourt, 1989), 365.

<sup>5</sup> Carol Camper, “Book Review of *The Essays of Virginia Woolf: Vol. 1 1904-1912*”, *Georgia Review*, Vol. 42, No. 3 (1988), 654.

This sense of musicality is linked to human emotion, and the journey to the solemn and mysterious places are later realised as the representations of the dark places of human psychology. Woolf writes of such moments: “That beautiful sights and strange emotions created waves of sound in his brain before they shaped themselves into articulate words” (367). Though Woolf’s recognition of De Quincey is less defined here, the “pagant” writer and his writings would still “travel down...from great height, reverberating with strange thunders” (368) and take readers to “haunt the region of clouds and glories” (368) in ways that Woolf finds hard to resist.

Woolf’s essays are a crucial critical intervention into early twentieth-century poetics, which aligns De Quincey more closely with a modernist ideology. Aside from these dedicated essays, De Quincey appears elsewhere in many of Woolf’s other writings. For instance, De Quincey was not only a writer beloved of Julia Stephen,<sup>6</sup> but also the prototype of Mr. Carmichael in *To the Lighthouse*.<sup>7</sup> In *Night and Day*, Ralph protests that he reads more De Quincey than Belloc and Chesterton, which earns him praise from Mrs. Cosham, who exclaims: “You are, then, a *rara avis* in your generation. I am delighted to meet anyone who reads De Quincey.”<sup>8</sup> Among one of very few modernist writers who pays such close critical attention to De Quincey, Woolf makes herself a modern *rara avis* and an enthusiastic apprentice.

## II.

### De Quincey and the Critics

After the sensational publication of *Confessions of an English Opium-Eater* in 1821,

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<sup>6</sup> Virginia Woolf, *Moments of Being* (London: Pimlico, 2002), 97. Hereafter cited with abbreviation, *MB*.

<sup>7</sup> John Ferguson, “A Sea Change: Thomas De Quincey and Mr. Carmichael in ‘To the Lighthouse’”, *Journal of Modern Literature*, Vol. 14, No. 1 (1987): 45-63.

<sup>8</sup> Virginia Woolf, *Night and Day* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 153. Hereafter cited with abbreviation, *ND*.

De Quincey carved a unique path for himself. When many of his peer group wrote poetry, he wrote prose; where English society was reserved and composed, he wrote about his personal addiction; and when the abuse of opium was a working-class pleasure, he transformed the habit into a refined enjoyment from which he drew the inspiration of his artistic pursuit.<sup>9</sup> There is something about De Quincey that consistently draws the attention of critics. Modern critics have looked at De Quincey from various points of view. In line with Paul de Man's deconstructive approach to autobiographical writing, S. J. Spector analyses De Quincey's autobiography from a deconstructive angle, arguing that, instead of consolidating De Quincey's subjectivity, De Quincey's textual self demonstrates that the constructed self can only be a figurative metaphor of himself. Therefore, a process of continuous creating and erasing of the self manifests itself as a never ending circuit in De Quincey's devotion to writing.<sup>10</sup> Aside from the question of genre, other critics focus on the subject matter of his writing. V.A. De Luca focuses on dreams and visions in De Quincey's writings, and suggests that De Quincey's literary focus on imagination, dreams and visions gives his prose the same transcendental power as Romantic poetry.<sup>11</sup> The unifying power of dreams in De Quincey's autobiography is also observed by R. J. Porter, who concludes that the freedom of De Quincey's prose style gives room to De Quincey's dreams and allows the transcendental unification of the past and the present, which achieves a unification of both in De Quincey's dreams and his writings.<sup>12</sup>

After the bicentenary of De Quincey's birth in 1985, research on De Quincey

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<sup>9</sup> Alina Clej, *A Genealogy of Modern Self: Thomas De Quincey and the Intoxication of Writing* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1995), v.

<sup>10</sup> S. J. Spector, "Thomas De Quincey; Self-Effacing Autobiographer", *Studies in Romanticism*, Vol. 18 (1979).

<sup>11</sup> V. A. De Luca, "De Quincey's Icons of Apocalypse: Some Romantic Analogues", in *Thomas De Quincey: Bicentenary Studies*, Robert Lance Snyder ed. (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1985), 20-34.

<sup>12</sup> R. J. Porter, "The Demon Past: De Quincey and the Autobiographer's Dilemma", *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900*, Vol. 20 (1980).

began to flourish. De Quincey is praised as an aesthete in Joel Black's *The Aesthetics of Murder*,<sup>13</sup> which closely investigates De Quincey's famous essays on murder and the dark art. He is also approached from a post-colonial perspective in Nigel Leask's *British Romantic Writers and the East: Anxieties of Empire*<sup>14</sup> because of the oriental(ist) scenes and exotic imaginations in his writings. John Barrell develops this perspective but, in emphasising also De Quincey's preoccupation with states of mind, he also draws on psychoanalytic perspectives. Barrell applies a Freudian psychoanalysis in his reading of De Quincey's writing and its relation to his private life to suggest an underlying incestuous guilt and an anxiety about orientalism in De Quincey's work.<sup>15</sup> Concentrating on De Quincey's art of autobiography, Edmund Baxter approaches his writing from a social and historical context, arguing that the vital factors such as the publishing industry and readership also contribute greatly to De Quincey's writing.<sup>16</sup> In *Sacramental Commodities*,<sup>17</sup> Charles J. Rzepka's theoretical approach examines De Quincey's own concept of palimpsest and probes the multi-layered meanings of De Quincey's writings, including his Oedipal struggle with Wordsworth, his sexual relationship with Ann, and his obsession with opium, power, sublimity and the art of languages. Rzepka defines his journey of reading De Quincey in the following way: "To me, De Quincey's own narratives seem to be constructed like the mental palimpsests he describes. They are littered with vestigial terms, phrases, and locutions, with shadowy characters and scenes, with

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<sup>13</sup> Joel Black, *The Aesthetics of Murder: A Study in Romantic Literature and Contemporary Culture* (Maryland: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991).

<sup>14</sup> Nigel Leask, *British Romantic Writers and the East: Anxieties of Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992).

<sup>15</sup> John Barrell, *The Infection of Thomas De Quincey: A Psychopathology of Imperialism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991). Though Barrell's book is published before Leask's, he claims in the preface his gratitude towards Leask's generosity in sharing the draft of his book and inspiring some of his ideas.

<sup>16</sup> Baxter, Edmund. *De Quincey's Art of Autobiography* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1990).

<sup>17</sup> Charles J. Rzepka, *Sacramental Commodities: Gift, Text, and the Sublime in De Quincey* (Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 1995).

smudged images and emblems that invite interpretive retracing.” (viii) De Quincey’s attractions for Rzepka reside in the power and the mystery of his writing, which seems ceaselessly to appeal to literary critics in the second half of the twentieth century.

De Quincey’s work has attracted much critical attention, but a conclusive study of his literary contribution and legacy is all but absent from recent studies. Over the last decade or so, critics have undertaken a close examination of Romanticism and its legacy to later generations. In *The All-Sustaining Air*,<sup>18</sup> Michael O’Neill examines the persistence of Romanticism in contemporary British, American and Irish poetry since 1900. The creative impact of Romantic poetry on later poets suggests new possibilities of incorporating past literary traditions in the making of the new. O’Neill acknowledges and represents the plural meanings and uses of Romanticism in the appropriation of later poets. As its subtitle—legacies and renewals—suggests, Romantics and later writers and readers share a reciprocal relationship in which tradition and individual talent are inevitably intertwined. In the study of Romanticism and its Victorian descendants, Andrew Radford and Mark Sandy identify (in *Romantic Echoes in the Victorian Era*) that modernist poetics “self-consciously echoes and... [is] haunted by the spectral figure of Romanticism.”<sup>19</sup> With a divided attitude toward Romantic forefathers, Victorian writers struggled to determine whether “Romanticism and its tropes should be claimed or refuted” (5-6) in their relationship with Romantic writers. Mark Sandy, in his most recent collection of essays, *Romantic Presences in the Twentieth Century*,<sup>20</sup> closely observes the “transformative re-imaginings of Romanticism” (3) in Modernism and its contribution in helping Modernist writers to contemplate “their treatment of the self, memory and time.” (6) Stemming from a

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<sup>18</sup> Michael O’Neill, *The All-Sustaining Air: Romantic Legacies and Renewals in British, American, and Irish Poetry since 1900* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

<sup>19</sup> Andrew Radford and Mark Sandy eds., *Romantic Echoes in the Victorian Era* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2008), 1.

<sup>20</sup> Mark Sandy ed., *Romantic Presences in the Twentieth Century* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2012).

similar understanding of Romanticism, Carmen Casaliggi and Paul March-Russell examine the recurrence of Romanticism in later literature. In *Legacies of Romanticism*, the editors take up Schlegel's observation that Romanticism is "not so much a literary genre as an element of poetry which may be more or less dominant or recessive, but never entirely absent"<sup>21</sup> and argues for Romantic legacies's never ending continuities in the works of contemporary writers.

Despite this prominent aspect of recent studies of Romanticism, which have focused on its legacy for later writers, De Quincey remains seldom or only sketchily mentioned and Woolf's efforts to bring De Quincey into the Modernist canon is nearly lost. Fortunately, Alina Clej's *A Genealogy of the Modern Self* is unique in that it follows up Woolf's readings of De Quincey and reconnects De Quincey's legacies with Modernism. As its title suggests, Clej wishes to retrieve the origins of the modern self in De Quincey's writing. Her argument sets out to rehabilitate De Quincey's status in the study of Modernism. Clej sees De Quincey's as a "decentered, 'nomadic,' and essentially modern form of subjectivity" (17); a void in the history of study awaiting fulfilment is suggested in Clej's argument. Clej claims that De Quincey is "one of the first writers, if not the very first, to experience and work out the symptoms of the modern self" (8) through writing. Creating a rhetorical substitution to replace the actual self is seen as a "'secret' of modern literary production—the secret that the modern authorial subject, even in its high Romantic mode, is a rhetorical construct fashioned out of echoes, a 'self' opened up to and by others and thoroughly penetrated by them." (249) Of course, the intention of replacing or fulfilling the role of the self with a textual substitute results in the endless journey of writing, which forms a sole emphasis on the process of writing where the end of the

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<sup>21</sup> Carmen Casaliggi and Paul March-Russell ed., *Legacies of Romanticism* (London: Routledge, 2012), 1.

journey is never in sight. Clej's observation is supported by De Quincey's obsessional re-writing of his autobiographies; however, the art of De Quincey's writings, as Woolf understood them, stands on their own right. Their artistic value cannot be replicated.

### III.

#### Woolf and Romanticism

In the study of Romanticism and its recurrence in Modernism, Patricia Waugh observes an orientation to Romanticism, "on the one hand, to a radical fictionalising mode and, on the other, to situatedness in the world".<sup>22</sup> Such tendencies are pervasive in Woolf's novels. Though the focus of the book is a study on postmodernism, Romantic traits seep through. Romanticism is a continuity that runs through modernism into postmodernism. In a discussion of Woolf, Waugh recognises the otherwise suppressed Romantic root of influence as being as important as that of more obvious writers such as Pater. (107) Other critics have also traced earlier influences on Woolf's writing.

Often Woolf's aesthetic is found to originate from Romanticism. In *Virginia Woolf's Novels and the Literary Past*,<sup>23</sup> Jane de Gay examines how Woolf translates her readings of past canonical works into her modernist writings. Gay argues (using a Bloomian trope) that, instead of enacting "radical swerves away from work of earlier authors in order to assert their originality", Woolf's "exchanges with her literary precursors were more complex and subtle." (7) Indeed, in contrast to Woolf's explicit reluctance to read her contemporaries and more recent Victorian predecessors, there is a positive sense of reminiscence in her attitude towards Romanticism. Woolf's

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<sup>22</sup> Patricia Waugh, *Practising Postmodernism, Reading Modernism* (London: Edward Arnold, 1992), 15.

<sup>23</sup> Jane de Gay, *Virginia Woolf's Novels and the Literary Past* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2006).



relationship with Romantic literature is evident; she enjoys reading Keats and Shelley; she responds to Wordsworth's notion of nature in *To the Lighthouse*, and Walter Scott's Waverley novels remained one of the most favoured works for the Stephens. Woolf recalls in "Sketch of the Past"<sup>24</sup> that her mother, Julia Stephen, always "kept De Quincey's Opium Eater on her table, one of her favourite books; and for a birthday present she chose all the works of Scott which her father gave her in the first edition." (97) Allan Chavkin also notes in *English Romanticism and Modern Fiction*,<sup>25</sup> Woolf's adventurous novel, *Orlando*, bears allusions and quotations from major Romantic writers and is also regarded by John W. Moses as progressing towards a mature Romantic aesthetic. (39) With the representation of the oak tree and Orlando's fascination with poetry, Woolf recognises with admiration the long history and tradition of English literature and pays her tribute to the Romantic poetics of the ideal organic harmony of nature and humanity. Through Orlando's observation of the changes of poetry, Woolf reviews the changes of literature over the centuries and examines fundamental ideas of Romanticism. She concludes that what runs through English literature is "the same brooding meditative temper, the same love of animals and nature, the same passion for the country and the seasons",<sup>26</sup> which Woolf embodies in the innate temperament of Orlando. Coleridge's use of androgyny is also woven into *A Room of One's Own* and helps to explain her ideal of a harmonious state of mind coloured with Romantic poetics—a state in which "the androgynous mind is resonant and porous; that it transmits emotion without impediment; that it is naturally creative, incandescent and undivided."<sup>27</sup> Of course, such a spirit of androgyny is

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<sup>24</sup> MB, 97. Woolf remembered her mother, Julia Stephen, always kept De Quincey's *Confessions of an English Opium-Eater*, one of her favourite books, on her table.

<sup>25</sup> Allan Chavkin ed., *English Romanticism and Modern Fiction: A Collection of Critical Essays* (New York: AMS Press, 1993).

<sup>26</sup> Virginia Woolf, *Orlando* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 226. Hereafter cited with abbreviation, *OL*.

<sup>27</sup> Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 128. Hereafter cited

embodied not only in the gender change of Orlando, but also in her open-minded attitude towards life.

In the opening preface of *Orlando*, the narrator writes: “no one can read or write without being perpetually in the debt of Defoe, Sir Thomas Browne, Sterne, Sir Walter Scott, Lord Macaulay, Emily Brontë, De Quincey and Walter Pater.—to name the first that come to mind.” (5) In “A Sea Change”, a study of the implicit but obvious influence of De Quincey on the character of Mr. Carmichael, Ferguson boldly suggests that “De Quincey’s bond with Woolf is the most private and profound.” (61) Mr. Carmichael, Ferguson observes, is a fictional incarnation of De Quincey, who inevitably “finds his way into her fiction” (62) and becomes a companion on her journey of creativity. Woolf’s review of De Quincey’s prose style was written around the same time as her manifesto on the modern writer, “The Narrow Bridge of Art” (1927), in which she complains about the rigidity of modern novels. De Quincey’s poetic prose, according to Ferguson, is where Woolf learns “how to restore to fiction the suppleness it seems to have lost.” (52)

Drawing on the similarities between Mr. Carmichael and De Quincey, the scene of Mr. Carmichael standing behind Lily Briscoe and her easel becomes a symbolic replication of De Quincey’s role as literary mentor in Woolf’s writing career. Ferguson suggests the relationship between De Quincey and Woolf is symbolised by that between Mr. Carmichael and Lily, as their relationship is on “a level so deep, so personal, that it overcomes the limitations of language” (57) in the realm where meanings are. Such intimacy is depicted in the last section of *To the Lighthouse*, where “old Mr. Carmichael stood beside [Lily], looking like an old pagan god, swaying a little in his bulk” overseeing Lily and her art. Lily felt “They had not needed to speak. They had been thinking the same things and he had answered her

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with abbreviation, *AROO*.

without her asking him anything.”<sup>28</sup>

Of course, this intimate relationship is not a dependent imitation nor is it a hindering force from the past. As Ferguson states: “Lily’s precise pitching of her easel ‘on the edge of the lawn, not too close to Mr. Carmichael, but close enough for his protection’ is the exact fictional equivalent” of their literary relationship. As Harold Bloom claims, “There is no end to ‘influence,’”<sup>29</sup> and it is unlikely that Modernist writers would create a spontaneous new genesis free from any residues of the past. But an important preoccupation of Modernism is with the new, with creating their own narratives, even as they register the weight of influence of the past. Compared to Woolf’s more recent predecessors such as Pater,<sup>30</sup> Fry, and her Bloomsbury peers,<sup>31</sup> De Quincey is a distant writer in time and place, as well as a close inspiration in ideas and practices. In Woolf’s essays and novels, there are resemblances to, and deviations from, De Quincey. De Quincey’s writing fuels Woolf’s ideas about Romantic extension as points to Modernist departures. It is these continuities and discontinuities of ideas between Woolf and her Romantic inheritance that this thesis sets out to investigate.

#### IV.

##### De Quincey and Woolf

Ferguson’s description of the relationship between De Quincey and Woolf—not too close, but close enough—is an appropriate way to pinpoint what this thesis wishes to examine. The thesis consists of six chapters arranged in three sections, and each

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<sup>28</sup> Virginia Woolf, *To the Lighthouse* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 169. Hereafter cited with abbreviation, *TLL*.

<sup>29</sup> Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), xi.

<sup>30</sup> Perry Meisel, *The Absent Father: Virginia Woolf and Walter Pater* (Connecticut: Yale University Press, 1980).

<sup>31</sup> Ann Banfield, *The Phantom Table: Woolf, Fry, Russell and the Epistemology of Modernism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

section has a pair of two chapters, one on De Quincey and the other on Woolf. The focus of the first section is to examine the aesthetics of each writer, discussing their critical views and ideas of literature. The second section investigates their treatments and representations of time and its special relationship to their understanding of self. The final section is devoted to looking at their practices of putting aesthetic criticism and ideologies about time into their autobiographical writings. Broadly speaking, the three sections are designed to look incrementally at their literary ideas and professional insights, followed by a closer look at their philosophical understanding of the nature of self, which is often perceived and understood in relation to time in the social and personal (macrocosmic and microcosmic) dimensions. The final investigation of the autobiographical writings of De Quincey and Woolf brings into focus previous discussions on hermeneutic practice in order to see how their theories are transformed and backed up by both writers' aesthetic practice.

The arrangement of these chapters and sections roughly follows the chronological development of Woolf's writing career. Literary reviews were Woolf's earliest publications and her first published essay was "Review of *The Son of Royal Langbrith*, by W.D. Howells"<sup>32</sup> in *The Guardian*, 1904. She continued to publish critical essays before her first novel, *The Voyage Out*, was published. Her essays are the place where Woolf builds up her critical insights and many of the most important essays, such as "The Decay of Essay-writing" (1905), "The English Mail Coach" (1906), "Art and Life" (1909), "Women Novelists" (1918), "Modern Novels" (1919), "The Anatomy of Fiction" (1919), "Freudian Fiction" (1920), are published during this period. In her apprenticeship years, Woolf's aesthetic gradually takes on a clearer shape. With this in mind, the focus of this thesis is on the formative years of Woolf's

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<sup>32</sup> For references of Woolf's publications, consult *Virginia Woolf: Critical Assessments*, ed. by Eleanor McNeess (Sussex: Helm Information, 1994).

art considered alongside the reading of De Quincey's literary criticism in the first section. In Woolf's novels, time is a constant topic for literary contemplation. The meditation on the treatment of time is most prominent in *Mrs. Dalloway*, *To the Lighthouse* and *Orlando*, in which experimental writing techniques are utilised to clarify her thinking about the representation of time. However, in the effort of resolving the opposing dualism between permanence and transience; immortality and mortality; social and personal and the external and internal, she also discovers the terms for defining the nature of the modern self. It is the goal of the second section to examine De Quincey's Romantic contemplation on time and its lasting influence on Woolf. Following the discussions of the artistic ideals of literature and the philosophical reflections on time, the third pair concludes previous observations with a close reading of De Quincey's and Woolf's autobiographical writings. Woolf's long term interest in autobiographical writing is a latent one. Though, unlike De Quincey, Woolf never published any autobiography, autobiographical allusions and inspirations are traceable in almost every one of her novels. Published posthumously, *Moments of Being* illuminates and explains much of Woolf's writing in retrospect. Similarly, this thesis culminates with an examination of their autobiographical writings which consolidates the connection between De Quincey and Woolf.

Laying down the foundation of the thesis, the first chapter, "De Quincey's Vital Emphasis: The Literature of Power as Fine Art", begins with a broader picture of the most prominent writers in the Romantic period—Wordsworth, Coleridge and Shelley. This leads to the main focus on De Quincey and his argument concerning the power and knowledge of literature. Literature of power is among the most famous formulations of De Quincey's literary criticism through which he wishes to establish a transcendental status for literature and to secure literature in the field of fine art. His argument finds common ground with Romantic poetics; similarly, De Quincey's

literature of power aims to equip prose writing with the same sympathetic power as poetry. His elevated view of the use of literature is echoed by Shelley's poetics in *A Defence of Poetry*. De Quincey's critical writings recurrently elaborate on the idea of power and a corresponding taste cultivated in his readers. To elaborate on the cultivated taste, De Quincey develops Kant's philosophy of the sublime in "On Murder Considered as One of the Fine Arts", which assists his famous narrative of the dark art. What appeals to De Quincey's attention in the experience of the sublime is the suspended moments of mundane experience, in which the external and the ordinary retreat temporarily in the face of the overwhelming experience of artistic immersion. This chapter illuminates how De Quincey's prose style and his insistence on the power of literature are taken up by Woolf in her own modernist practice—the exposure to moments of the sublime are transformed and depicted by Woolf as modern epiphanies or what she terms "moments of being".

Following the discussion of De Quincey's literary ideas, the second chapter looks closely at "Woolf's Art of Fiction" to explore essays and reviews to understand how they work towards the formation of Woolf's aesthetic. This chapter begins with Woolf's "Impassioned Prose", an important essay for illuminating the influence of De Quincey on Woolf. Of course, from De Quincey, Woolf experiences not only the opium-eater's views on art, but a more all-encompassing Romantic sentiment. Woolf, as a later writer and a reader of Romanticism, finds a shortcut via the writings of De Quincey to the insights of other Romantic poets. Enlightened by De Quincey's Romanticism-infused poetic prose, Woolf places confidence in the new era, in which Realism retreats and Modernism begins even if its roots are in Romanticism. Her art of fiction is a revolt against Realistic novels and a re-evaluation of De Quincey's literary contribution, with a special focus on the poetic elements in his prose. De Quincey's impassioned prose provides a possible direction for Woolf's own poetic

experiments in prose writing, as she describes the writing of *To the Lighthouse*.<sup>33</sup> As a female writer, Woolf also sees her gender as a possible way of rejecting and escaping conventional narratives conducted and dominated by male writers. The lack of attention to female narratives reflects a deficiency in literary history and tradition. Modern writers and female writers experienced a similar predicament; while modern writers struggle to find adequate means of representation in Realistic novelists for modern fictions, female writers face an even more barren past with no phrases and sentences for their own experiences in a patriarchal literary tradition. Woolf is devoted to making her own voice heard, and she encourages her fellow women to write and create their own literary language. In the era of heteroglossia, Woolf's voice as a novelist is constantly disturbed by, or conversing with, the voices of others. As Walter Pater had his say about art, and so did Roger Fry, Freud and many others, this chapter hopes to show how Woolf is inspired by the writerly discipline of De Quincey to establish her own art of fiction as the focus of the picture.

Following the first two chapters, the focus shifts to the concept of time in both De Quincey's and Woolf's writings. In De Quincey's elaboration on the power of opium and the power of literature, an indispensable concern is the knowledge of self against the understanding of time. Chapter Three, "Aspects of Self and Time in De Quincey", examines the representations of time in De Quincey alongside his Romantic peers— Coleridge, Wordsworth, and Shelley. With a growing emphasis on subjective experiences, the concept of time is open to literary enquiries and answers outside of St. Augustine's religious interpretation. Increasingly God does not own our time; time exists in the minds of each individual. In De Quincey's writings, opium is the gatekeeper of his extraordinary experiences of time; under the influence of opium,

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<sup>33</sup> Virginia Woolf, *A Writer's Diary* (London: Harcourt, 1982), 104. Hereafter cited with abbreviations, *WD*.

time stretches and condenses beyond that which any conscious measures might comprehend. An alien perception of opium-induced time sets itself as the opposite of traditional clock time, and this brings to De Quincey's writing a rebellious tactic of following his own mind instead of the chronological development of historical time. As a consequence, the human mind occupies an important place in De Quincey's writings. Opium liberates De Quincey as well as his perception of time. Time is most free and untamed in his dreams, as they possess unlimited capability to extend and prolong experience. However, the concept of death challenges the boundary of time, indicating a clear ending point of mortality and oddly achieves De Quincey's perspective on the meanings of life. Much of De Quincey's sense of self is closely tied to his perception of time; he measures his mortal existence against the background of a grand history. However, the inner perception of time provides insightful views of the potential of human possibility. Within a limited mortality, how unlimited can one be? The developed inner scale of time indicates a temporary suspension of external measures; De Quincey links it to the experience of the sublime. Sublimity, as he concludes, rejects man-made confinements and enlightens him on the real essence of humanity.

The question of the dominance of external time permeates into Woolf's writings, and this is especially so when her fast changing society threatens to diminish the individual sense of time. In "Woolf's Interpretation of Time", the preliminary focus is placed on Woolf's complaints about Edwardian Realism and its monopoly of the definition of reality. For Woolf, in order to represent modern life, striking a balance between historical time and personal time is an inescapable issue. In Woolf's novels, chronological sequences are worked out with personal intervention, and personal time is presented with a historical surrounding. It would not be true to say that Woolf rejects external time, but she insists that clock time should not dominate individual



time nor should it occupy a central narrative place. She wants her novels to note the importance of time, both the intensity of individual moments and the continuous movement of the passage of time. Her novels are dialogues between the external and the internal, a negotiation between others and the self. In *Mrs. Dalloway*, each strike of Big Ben is an intruding reminder of modern life yet it is also a sound of the reassurance of an orderly world, which she aims at presenting the picture with an eye on both external and internal reality. From a more feminist point of view, women perceive time differently from men. Women live their lives not in a neat and clean linear manner, but more in a fragmentary and circuitous way. If women are to have their own sense of time understood, which in another sense is to have their own history established, Woolf encourages them to write. Women's sense of time is a challenge to patriarchal narrative, and it is also a symbolic overthrow of Edwardian Realism. Woolf employs the theoretical ideas of Henri Bergson to elaborate on her own "moments of being", which is a recurring nostalgia for the past. The past intrudes into the present in the same way as Big Ben, which always has its presence in the picture. These salient moments may belong to the past; yet through writing, Woolf makes them part of the present.

Chapters on the aesthetics of literature and the presentation of time form the next section of the thesis on the practice of autobiographical writing. De Quincey and Woolf have different attitudes towards the publication of autobiographical writings: one is very enthusiastic, the other reclusive and shy. However, both share a passion for using writing as the tool to understand and express the self. Chapter Five, "Representing the Self in the Ambiguous Genre of Autobiography and De Quincey's Writings", begins with a discussion of the ambiguous genre of autobiography (with the help of Paul de Man's deconstructive theory). De Man's deconstructive approach, though aiming to dismiss the indestructible relationship between the autobiographer

and the autobiography, reaffirms the inevitable manipulation in De Quincey's textual construction of the self, illuminating the possible intention of his writings. The exhibition of a textually created self involves the readers' participation in the confirmation of the contractual relationship, which certifies an agreed truthfulness of the writing. Furthermore, the textual self indicates a split between the writing self and the written self, which perhaps reflects the most significant role of writing in De Quincey's shaping of the self. With Nietzsche's *Will to Power* in mind, it is not hard to see De Quincey's writings as answering the first half of Nietzsche's famous quote on the nature of self: *how one becomes what one is*? As to what one actually is, De Quincey answers it with his insight into the mysterious world of the human mind. Using the example of the palimpsest, De Quincey believes in the capacity of the human mind to store all imprints upon it that determine who and what it is. With the discovery of the mind, the possibility of what the self might be is signposted. Antonio Damasio in his neurological study suggests two types of self—the core self and the autobiographical self. Though less elaborated and less scientific as De Quincey's writings might be, his enthusiasm in autobiographical narrative and the fascination of the mind have somehow anticipated Antonio Damasio's later scientific speculations.

Woolf has a long-expressed passion for, and interest in, biography and life-writing in general, but she has a reserved attitude towards autobiographical writings. The final chapter, "Woolf's Literary Journey of Writing the Self", argues that (even though Woolf's autobiographies are published only posthumously) Woolf has been littering autobiographical allusions, ideas and experiments throughout her essays and novels for much of her career. Her last autobiographical piece, "Sketch of the Past", sums up her literary career as well as manifesting her artistic ideas in the form of autobiography. *Night and Day* is Woolf's preliminary fictional reflection upon life writing, in which she examines Victorian conventions and wishes to grope toward her

own narrative style. Much of the reflection on life-writing is also tackled in her critical essays on the techniques of fiction writing as well as those on thoughts on the genre of life-writing. Fictional creation and the depiction of life are gradually mingled together in Woolf's philosophy as a writer. Posing challenges to the rigidities of the traditional forms of life-writing, *Orlando* is Woolf's whimsical attempt at a serious revolution. Fundamentally, Woolf wishes to turn away from a material and superficial focus towards a more spiritual sense of the inner magnitude of humanity. Aside from age, wealth, status and the size of the house, one's feelings, emotions, and memories are of equal importance. The world we see in Woolf's novels is always one which balances itself somewhere between the external and internal, and it is the same with her autobiographical pursuits. This is explained in her reading of De Quincey; when she talks about his artistic style, she uses his autobiographies to elucidate her point and vice versa. The inseparable and ambiguous relationship between life and story makes Woolf treat her creative novels and reportage autobiographies in a similar manner. As a writer, Woolf lives her life through writing, and writes her life into art.

The similarities between De Quincey and Woolf are not unnoticed but, perhaps, because of the relative obscurity of De Quincey and Woolf's more prominent image as an avant-garde modernist, the relationship between the two writers has rarely attracted the sustained critical attention of a close study. As Clej points out, among the first generation of Romantics, De Quincey is easily seen "as a minor, erratic figure" (Clej, 5); however, Woolf rightly says that De Quincey "made a class for himself" (*GR*, 34) and she shows a strong but ineffable intimacy with him. With a recent renaissance in the study of Romantic presences in later generations and an increased sense of Modernism as being indebted to the past as well as creating the new, crucial attention has now begun to move towards previously obscured literary connections and imaginative exchanges. This shift in critical attention has allowed this thesis to

undertake a study of the often neglected creative dialogue between the writings of De Quincey and Woolf.

## Chapter One

### De Quincey's Vital Emphasis:

#### The Literature of Power as Fine Art

In the study of English literature, Romanticism constitutes a shared past for subsequent literary generations; Paul de Man says “we carry it within ourselves as the experience of an act in which, up to a certain point, we ourselves have participated.”<sup>34</sup> Romanticism permeates into later literature; however, it is not as a dead language but as an ideology that is woven into the history of British literature and shapes later generations. As what was once thought of as a spirit of the age, Romanticism reaches almost every aspect of human life and its all-embracing ideas are associated “with freedom from convention and immense formal sophistication, with a deep interest in history and a longing for utopias, with visions of unity and a new delight in particularity, with scientific progress and hostility to Newtonian thought”,<sup>35</sup> from a contemporary point of view, therefore, “These Romantic presences cannot be exorcised from the questions that twentieth- and twenty-first—century literary works pose about subjectivity, representation, genre, and artistic form.” (Sandy 2012, 2-3)

It is not absurd to suggest that later generations of literary creation are in themselves in part a response to the ideas of the Romantic period. Among the studies of Romantic legacies, De Quincey appears to be a less obtrusive figure and his contributions to later legacies less studied. However, the modernist writer Virginia Woolf picks up De Quincey's literary heritage from amongst the more prominent poets and transforms some of De Quincey's Romantic ideas through her own

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<sup>34</sup> Paul de Man, *The Rhetoric of Romanticism* (New York: Columbia university Press, 1984), 50.

<sup>35</sup> Michael O'Neill, “Preface” in *Romanticism and its Legacies. Romanticism*, Vol. 14 (2008).

interpretations. De Quincey's legacy bequeathed to Woolf is, unfortunately, a topic that has received little dedicated research. A suggestive reflection of Andrew McNeillie, however, states that De Quincey was an influential figure in the Bloomsbury circle, from whom the term "oriental" and other Bloomsbury ideas were taken.<sup>36</sup> From the reading of Woolf's early work "The English Mail Coach", McNeillie observes that De Quincey's influence on Woolf was no less significant than that of Walter Pater:

In fact the most extensive of her few published observations on Pater occurs in "The English Mail Coach", which ends in praise of De Quincey's rapid and reverberating style, a style incapable of being groomed to suit a Paterian sentence, or tamed and housed in a Paterian architecture. (McNeillie, 6)

McNeillie's study recognises De Quincey's legacy passed on to Woolf, and aligns Woolf with De Quincey in the tradition of English essay writing. Meanwhile, Hermione Lee also sees in Woolf's essays a beauty that originates in De Quincey's autobiographical writings; De Quincey's autobiography, for Woolf, reveals a secret and private sentiment not only because of his self-possessed and composed style, but a "curious sense of intimacy" (*GR*, 39) that grows between the writer and the readers and bonds the two parties together. Lee feels the complex but intricate experience of reading De Quincey similar to the reading of Woolf's essays because they are "at once so free, light and conversational, so artful and composed and so full of strong feeling."<sup>37</sup> However, other scholars suggest further pathways of investigation. John Ferguson relates De Quincey to Mr. Carmichael in *To the Lighthouse* in "A Sea Change: Thomas De Quincey and Mr. Carmichael in 'To the Lighthouse'" (Ferguson

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<sup>36</sup> Andrew McNeillie, "Bloomsbury" in *The Cambridge Companion to Virginia Woolf*, ed. by Sue Roe and Susan Sellers (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 6.

<sup>37</sup> Hermione Lee, "Virginia Woolf's Essays" in *The Cambridge Companion to Virginia Woolf*, ed. by Sue Roe and Susan Sellers (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 107.

1987, 45); Charles Schug examines in *The Romantic Genesis of the Modern Novel*<sup>38</sup> how *Mrs. Dalloway* and *To the Lighthouse* embody within themselves traits of Romanticism, but neither study provides adequate investigation into De Quincey's influence on Woolf as a novelist.

Like Woolf, De Quincey's writing career was a prolific one and included a great deal of literary criticism alongside creative writings. De Quincey's prose style may separate him from his poetic contemporaries, but his ideal of style in prose writing shares their poetic concepts and the focus on the concept of imagination, sympathy and power, which he famously elaborates in his critical essays. Much indebted to the literary ideas of Wordsworth and Coleridge, his well-known formulation on the difference between the "literature of knowledge" and the "literature of power" gathers both positive and negative reviews, establishing De Quincey's reputation as a critic as a somewhat unsettled category of value. With a view to studying De Quincey's literary influence on Woolf, this chapter probes into De Quincey's own literary practice and critical essays to suggest the distinction between the literature of knowledge and the literature of power, which argues for literature as a form of fine art that conjures and cultivates the taste of his readers, is the fundamental idea for De Quincey's psychological criticism; at the same time, however, De Quincey inherits poetic ideas from his Romantic peers that shape his prose not in the direction of the prosaic but in that of the poetic, to confer on it a poetic effect that "has but a bastard kind of beauty" (*GR*, 32) that "work[s] upon our minds as poetry works upon them." (*GR*, 33) De Quincey's characteristic writing of prose and his literary ideas are similarly to be found in Woolf as the later writer adapts them in the shaping of her own ideas on the poetic art of fiction writing.

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<sup>38</sup> Charles Schug, *The Romantic Genesis of the Modern Novel* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1979).

### De Quincey as a Critic

Informed by wide reading interests as well as his conversations with Wordsworth and Coleridge, De Quincey is a productive and prolific writer of critical essays and it is in both these essays as well as his other prose writings that he delivers his theories of literature and aesthetic reflections. However, his reputation as a literary critic is a bitter sweet combination. Sigmund Proctor in *Thomas De Quincey's Theory of Literature* summarises previous studies on De Quincey's literary ideas and points out that one reason why De Quincey's reputation as a literary critic was never secure in comparison to his other literary outputs is the fact that De Quincey's criticism is scattered among discursive passages in essays dedicated to other subjects.<sup>39</sup> Though John E. Jordan, in the introduction to *De Quincey as Critic*, praises the fact that De Quincey's prose displays a "painstaking mastery",<sup>40</sup> Jordan holds a similar view to Proctor and finds it hard to endorse De Quincey's achievement as a literary critic. De Quincey "cannot be ranked among the very great critics because his work is too fragmentary and unreliable." (Jordan 1973, 46) The same problem is also detected by Woolf; she believes De Quincey "suffers from the gift of seeing everything a size too large, and reproducing his vision in words which are also a size too large" (Woolf 1989, 366). Stylistically, verbosity and excessive reflection are De Quincey's faults; but in its content his work is intellectually adventurous and his criticism covers various topics ranging from literature, art, style to rhetoric. All in all, prolific though De Quincey is, unfortunately, the lack of coherency makes it difficult for later scholars to grasp a clearer picture and a more complete shape of De Quincey's literary theory.

A loose use of terms and inconsistency of diction equally account for the

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<sup>39</sup> Sigmund K. Proctor, *Thomas De Quincey's Theory of Literature* (New York: Octagon Books, 1966).

<sup>40</sup> John E. Jordan, *De Quincey as Critic* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1973), xv.



negative reception of De Quincey's criticism. Proctor investigates the terminology of De Quincey in the elaboration of the literature of knowledge and the literature of power and suggests De Quincey's later elaboration in the 1848 review of "The Poetry of Pope" is more coherent in both ideas and terminology compared to his first announcement in 1823 in "Letters to a Young Man whose Education has been Neglected" (Proctor, 111). De Quincey's distinction in terminology is especially important not as a provision of categories for classification, but as applied as a principle of understanding. Proctor claims the importance of De Quincey's distinction should be recognised (120) for the study of De Quincey's literary criticism, because the definition is "the best single example of what De Quincey expected of literature and of the persistent dualism in his thought."<sup>41</sup>

Regardless of its fragmentary nature and inconsistency in terminology, De Quincey's criticism nevertheless receives positive recognitions from later scholars. Verbosity might be De Quincey's fault; however, in the same essay, Woolf also praises De Quincey's mastery of language and the finer meaning his words bring. Helen Darbyshire views De Quincey positively as "the first of English critics to support consistently... the theory that in literature, as in all the arts, substance and form are inseparable" and thus his "reflections upon the theory of literature are penetrating and suggestive"<sup>42</sup> proposing a new insight into literary criticism. With his fine power of intellectual analysis, De Quincey examines the subtle impressionistic traits of literature (Proctor, 5), which leads De Quincey to establish his approach of psychological criticism<sup>43</sup> that favours the tracing of the emotional impact of

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<sup>41</sup> John E. Jordan, *Thomas De Quincey, Literary Critic: His Method and Achievement* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1952), 38.

<sup>42</sup> Helen Darbyshire, "Introduction" in *De Quincey's Literary Criticism* (London: Henry Frowde, 1909).

<sup>43</sup> Grevel Lindop, "Introduction" in *Confessions of an English Opium-Eater* by Thomas De Quincey (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996).

particular moments and the style of impassioned prose so highly praised by Woolf.

### De Quincey's Formulation between Power and Knowledge

In Schug's study, Woolf's modern "novels strive toward the status of poetry" (189) in ways that suggest that the common quest behind Modernist novels is to answer and respond to "a universal human experience or at least questions our ability to know what we feel and experience is felt and experienced by others." (226) The poetic status of literary works lies in their ability to relate to, represent and inspire human beings; such ability resides in the work itself, it is the innate nature of poetics. The knowledge of understanding the shared human nature behind daily experiences and the power to represent and deliver them to others is already a quest in De Quincey's literary theory and practice of the literature of power.

In 1823, two years after publishing *Confessions of English Opium-Eater*, De Quincey first draws the distinction between "books of knowledge" and "the literature of power" in "Letters to a Young Man whose Education has been Neglected".<sup>44</sup>

The word literature is a perpetual source of confusion, because it is used in two senses, and those senses liable to be confounded with each other. In a philosophical use of the word, Literature is the direct and adequate antithesis of Books of Knowledge. But, in a popular use, it is a mere term of convenience for expressing inclusively the total books of a language.... But, in the philosophical sense... even books of much higher pretensions must be excluded.<sup>45</sup>

The distinction between literature of power and books of knowledge, imaginative and analytical respectively, is set out as the premise of De Quincey's literary theory.

Against using literature of power as the term covering any form of written language,

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<sup>44</sup> The article appeared in *London Magazine*, March 1823, a time when De Quincey was enjoying his literary success as an essayist after publishing *The Confessions of an English Opium-Eater* in 1821.

<sup>45</sup> Thomas De Quincey, *The Collected Writings of Thomas De Quincey*, Vol. X, ed. by David Mason (London: A. & C. Black, 1897), 46-7. Other citations from this collection will be cited with volume number and page number.

De Quincey's concept of literature is exclusive and selective. To be recognised as literature of power means to meet certain criteria. De Quincey's exclusive use of the literature of power is concerned with the form that a work takes, the subject matter that it addresses as well as with the effect it incites in readers' mind. In other words, De Quincey is more concerned with the substance of a work and believes the substance is what designates a written work's status and value as well as its eligibility to be categorised as literature of power. Though De Quincey does not clearly pinpoint his ideal literature, it is reasonable to assume whatever is to be called literature will only be complete when it fulfils De Quincey's expectation of the literature of power.

Refusing to accept the traditional proposition that books are either to instruct or amuse, De Quincey uses Milton's epic poem, *Paradise Lost*, to argue against such a simple definition of what literature should be. Not to be called a book, *Paradise Lost*, as well as other great poems, belongs to the realm of literature of power. *Paradise Lost* is devoid of instruction and cannot be thought of in derogatory terms as simply amusement because it "has done the most of any human work to raise and dignify human nature" (X, 48). Literature in De Quincey's criticism stands for an ideal form of fine art; it is understood by De Quincey as a metaphysical concept. Literature does not equate to books, and thus should not be judged and understood as books, which appear to De Quincey only as a general and undifferentiated term of written and printed works. In plain language, the book is a physical form but literature is a spirit.

Literature is not the opposite of books, and will not provide what the opposite of books might provide. De Quincey thinks books provide knowledge, but it is untrue that literature thus provides pleasure. Instead, communicating power is the most important attribute of literature in De Quincey's criticism:

I have said that the antithesis of Literature is Books of Knowledge. Now, what is that antithesis to *knowledge* which is here implicitly latent in the

word of literature? ... The true antithesis to knowledge, in this case, is not *pleasure*, but *power*. All that is literature seeks to communicate power; all that is not literature, communicate knowledge. (X, 48)

Based on De Quincey, what literature should appeal to is the imaginative and sympathetic part of humanity, whereas books have the utilitarian purpose of educating in facts. De Quincey finds in *Paradise Lost* an example of what might be expected from authentic literature, because it communicates power— “a pretension far above all communication of knowledge.” (X, 49) If *Paradise Lost* is to be instructive, it would be so only through the evocation of poetic justice<sup>46</sup> within those readers who are attuned to Milton’s apprehension of the genuine truth of humanity.

Throughout his 1823 elaboration of the theoretical distinction between power and knowledge, De Quincey’s old fault manifests itself in De Quincey’s confusing and interchangeable use of terms. Books of knowledge are the antithesis of literature, and books are proposed to instruct. However, as the antithesis of books of knowledge, literature does not provide pleasure, regarded as the opposite side of instructing, but power. De Quincey was not yet able to explain what he means by power and he fails to deliver a clear theoretical formulation in his 1823 elaboration on this topic. However, the problem of the loose use of terms may be innate to literature itself. De Quincey’s definition of literature helps to explain some of the reasons for his own lack of theoretical clarity:

It is difficult to construct the idea of “literature” with severe accuracy; for it is a fine art—the supreme fine art, and liable to the difficulties which attend such a subtle notion; in fact, a severe construction of the idea must be the result of a philosophical investigation into this subject... (X, 47)

The implication in this paragraph speaks not only about the difficulty in defining what literature is, but also the philosophical, rather than practical, value of De Quincey’s own literary theory, which Proctor believes should be an important development into

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<sup>46</sup> “Poetic justice” is the term De Quincey uses to describe the ability to comprehend the truth of a higher level. It is close to the Romantic idea of imagination proposed by Wordsworth and Coleridge.

the study of the value and function of literature (120). This vague idea of what literature is and its relation to fine art will be elaborated into a fuller picture later in De Quincey's *On Murder* and other aesthetic essays with the help of Kantian philosophy on the sublime and taste.

In the 1848 review, "The Poetry of Pope" (XI, 51), De Quincey illustrates the differences between literature of power and literature of knowledge but with a much more generous use of the term 'literature' and here he communicates his ideas better:

There is, first, the literature of *knowledge*; and, secondly, the literature of *power*. The function of the first is—to *teach*; the function of the second is—to *move*: the first is a rudder; the second, an oar or a sail. The first speaks to the *mere* discursive understanding; the second speaks ultimately, it may happen, to the higher understanding or reason, but always *through* affections of pleasure and sympathy. (XI, 54)

Instead of regarding "books of knowledge" as opposite to literature as he did in 1823, which implies the problematic equation between books and literature, De Quincey's writing in 1848 modifies his theory and uses a revised distinction to suggest that literature of knowledge engages itself with the communication of science while the concern of literature of power is the ultimate appreciation of the infinite truth (XI, 112). Instead of insisting that literature provides no pleasure, De Quincey now admits that the literature of power also works on appealing to a sense of pleasure through empathetic human emotions to reach the higher understanding or reason of the human mind. As De Quincey's use of terms becomes less rigid, however, his ideas get clearer; he elevates the status of literature and solidifies literature as a form of fine art.

Admitting that most books belong to the middle ground between delivering knowledge and conveying power, De Quincey proposes that the status of a book does not designate its literary attributes; neither does literature necessarily have to take its form in books (XI, 53). The power of literature, we may thus suggest, is not a piece of physical evidence but, similar to the ability to comprehend the beauty of truth that De

Quincey called “poetic justice”, an ideological concept in De Quincey’s theory.

### The Power Bestowed and the Power Called Forth

It is fair to say that, in the 1848 review of Pope’s poetry, De Quincey is more aware of the working of the literature of power and is more sensitive to the power worked on human minds. The literature of power, De Quincey suggests, keeps human sensibilities from drooping and dwindling (XI, 56) and rescues affections from torpor (XI, 47). With De Quincey’s own fascination with the internal world, it is naturally important for him to devise and promote a form of communication that resonates with the rhythm of his imagination and leaves a lingering reverberation in his mind.

Different from the communication of knowledge, within which every step of it carries the readers “further on the same plane, but could never arise [the readers] one foot above your ancient level of earth”; the first step of literature of power, however, is a flight—“an ascending movement into another element where earth is forgotten.” (XI, 56) The communication of knowledge is literature of a didactic manner, whereas the delivery of power is about delivering the full potential of literature and bringing insightful revelation.

De Quincey’s literary criticism is developed with the help of his own writing, and vice versa. In order to influence and make the readers feel with their intuition instead of thinking with reasons, the literature of power brings a sense of de-familiarisation. In “On the Knocking at the Gate in Macbeth,” De Quincey proposes a similar thought: “[i]n order that a new world may step in, this world must for a time disappear.”<sup>47</sup> Providing a suspended moment, in which the science of the physical world and the influence of literature of knowledge are both temporarily

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<sup>47</sup> Thomas De Quincey, “On the Knocking at the Gate in Macbeth” in *On Murder* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 6. Hereafter cited with abbreviation, *KGM*.

suspended and forgotten is critical. Such a window of suspended moments is the space for the unfolding of “human passions, desires, and genial emotions” (XI, 55) to experience the literature of power. De Quincey argues that to excite and touch the readers’ unconscious inert states of mind is the representation of the power delivered in literature:

Now, if it be asked what is meant by communicating power, I, in my turn, would ask by what name a man would designate the case which I should be made to feel vividly, and with a vital consciousness, emotion which ordinary life rarely or never supplies occasions for exciting, and which had previously lain unwakened, and hardly within the dawn of consciousness—as myriads of modes of feeling are at this moment in every human mind for want of a poet to organize them? (X, 48)

The power of literature works upon the human mind to stir and vibrate what has long been unrecognised within readers and to make them feel unfamiliar thrills. Speaking from De Quincey’s own fascination with human emotions and affects, literature must be capable of bringing the extraordinary out of the ordinary, fulfilling its purpose to de-familiarise the familiar. In “Art as Technique”, Viktor Shklovsky suggests “art exists that one may recover the sensation of life; it exists to impart the sensation of things as they are perceived and not as they are known. The technique of art is to make objects ‘unfamiliar’.”<sup>48</sup> De Quincey’s ideal literature should perform the same de-familiarising effect in order to create a new sensational impact on the reading mind. Like art for Shklovsky, literature “exists that one may recover the sensation of life; it exists to make one feel things, to make the stone stony.” (Shklovsky, 18)

To arouse the internal resonance within readers by throwing a different light on life is expected by De Quincey to be the function of literature. This capacity of literature is not only exhibited in De Quincey’s own fault of always “seeing things a size too big” but also illustrated in De Quincey’s reading of *King Lear*, in which “the

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<sup>48</sup> Viktor Shklovsky, from “Art as Technique”, in L. T. Lemon and M. J. Reis, trans. and ed. *Russian Formalism and Criticism: Four Essays* (Nebraska: Nebraska University Press, 1965), 11-15; 18.

height, and depth, and breadth, of human passion is revealed to us, and, for the purpose of sublime antagonism, is revealed in the weakness of an old man's nature, and in one night two worlds of storm are brought face to face" (X, 49) and therefore the audience are "suddenly startled into a feeling of the infinity of the world within." (X, 49) As a consequence, De Quincey asks a question that has already been answered by himself: "Is this power, or what may I call it?" (X, 49) Power as it is, De Quincey wishes literature to aim at re-awakening the vibrancy of human emotions in order to redirect the attention from looking outwards to an inward state of introspection. As Burwick concludes in *Thomas De Quincey: Knowledge and Power*, the literature of power brings revelatory moments to readers, and "once these revelatory moments of power are aroused and awakened within the consciousness, they become a part of personal experience and weld themselves to kindred experiences."<sup>49</sup> It is through the literature of power that we can grasp the inner psychological responses when the "inert and sleeping form are organized, when these possibilities are actualized" (X, 48) within us.

De Quincey's literature of power is an abstract discussion on the effects of ideal literature without mentioning differences of genre. However, De Quincey's literary criticism bears evident influences of his peers. D. D. Delvin examines the ambiguous relationship between De Quincey and Wordsworth and points out in *De Quincey, Wordsworth and the Art of Prose*<sup>50</sup> that De Quincey is interested in the power bestowed as well as the power called forth based on his observation of Romantic poetry. The power bestowed is the "creative forces of man put forth in literature" that provides "*poetic justice*". Poetic justice is the justice that "attains its object, a justice that is more omnipotent over its own ends as dealing"; "with the element of its own

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<sup>49</sup> Frederick Burwick, *Thomas De Quincey: Knowledge and Power* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2001), 101.

<sup>50</sup> D. D. Delvin, *De Quincey, Wordsworth and the Art of Prose* (Hong Kong: Macmillan, 1983), 78.



creation, and with materials flexible to its own purest preconceptions”, poetic justice is “a vernal life of restoration” which germinates life into vital activities and rescues human emotions from torpor and senselessness (*XI*, 56-57). The power is the “exercise and expansion to [the readers’] own latent capacity of sympathy with the infinite” (*XI*, 56); in other words, the power—the deep sympathy with truth— of literature unveils the mystical potential of human sensibility and elevates our ability to comprehend truth.

Delvin investigates De Quincey’s theory on power and knowledge from the perspective of the relation between language and thought: “...power is most richly revealed in language which incarnates thought. Knowledge is dressed in language; power is incarnate in words and speaks through them.” (76) Here, the argument still centres on the substantial ideas communicated in the form of language, rather than the technical use of language itself. De Quincey asserts that “let the knowledge be what it might; all knowledge is translateable, and translateable without one atom of loss” (*X*, 50); “whereas the feeblest works in the Literature of Power, surviving at all, survive as finished and unalterable amongst men.” (*XI*, 57) The very nature of power is its unrepeatability, its uniqueness, and its singular existence. With this proposition in mind, De Quincey places emphasis not on language itself but on the ideological substance language conveys:

Every word has a thought corresponding to it, so that not by so much as one solitary counter can the words outrun the thoughts. But every thought has *not* a word corresponding to it: so that the thoughts may outrun the words by many a thousand counters. (*XI*, 81)

With the thoughts behind words, every individual work is a unique entity different from each other, not in the degree of better or worse nor in the sense of more or less, but they are different in an indecipherable and incommunicable difference “that cannot be caught by mimicries, that cannot be reflected in the mirror of copies, that

cannot become ponderable in the scales of vulgar comparison.” (XI, 58) In other words, De Quincey does not only value highly the literature of power, but expects writers to attach substance to forms as well as to deliver thoughts through language in order to educate and influence the higher level of reason beyond the reach of mathematical science by means of bringing emotional revelations and affectionate impacts. Through his own focus on the substance, instead of forms, of literature, De Quincey makes his own choice of prose writing over poetry a less important issue. Because powerful ideas should be delivered through any medium, and the differences in genre is only trivial and superficial.

De Quincey’s fascination with the human mind and its relation to literature of power is also observed by Burwick; he suggests that De Quincey is enchanted by the power that “reaches into the subconscious to stir changes in thought, feeling, and perception.” (1) The observations about De Quincey are supported by De Quincey’s long term focus on human inwardness and an interest in experiences that open the thresholds of the human mind. In *Confessions*, De Quincey deems opium as the true hero of his autobiographical writings. This statement is not to encourage the use of opium as much as to suggest the inciting power of opium. The effect of opium and that of literature overlap in this instance. In the “Preliminary Confessions”, De Quincey claims that his life adventures are to be regarded merely “as furnishing a key to some parts of that tremendous scenery which afterwards peopled the dreams of the Opium-eater”; he also deems opium as the true hero of the adventure because it is “the legitimate centre on which the interest [of his work] revolves.”<sup>51</sup> De Quincey’s fascination with opium lies in the omnipotent power of exciting and activating “the life force operative in all human endeavours” which, as Burwick suggests, is

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<sup>51</sup> Thomas De Quincey, *Confessions of an English Opium-Eater and Other Writings* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 78. Hereafter cited with abbreviation, *COE*.

otherwise “deeply buried within the mind, implanted by experience” and “unless thus aroused, never scrutinized, never organized with conscious deliberation.” (3) Behind De Quincey’s addiction to opium, the same gravitation towards the mind is evident. Similar to the power of literature, which casts its influence on the internal world of the human mind, the power of opium is one other agent that De Quincey employs for the purpose of exciting human emotions, feelings and thoughts.

De Quincey’s formulation of power in literature is echoed in Shelley’s *A Defence of Poetry*, in which Shelley elucidates his idea of poetry. In Shelley’s view, poetry has its power of uncovering truth: “A poem is the very image of life expressed in its eternal truth.”<sup>52</sup> As with De Quincey’s capitalised Literature, poetry in Shelley’s theory also stands for a bigger and more encompassing picture of idealised fine art. Literature and Poetry are at the acme of the theoretical hierarchy of each and both embody the hope of understanding and communicating a higher level of human sensibility, the shared common ground of humanity. De Quincey distinguishes the difference between the objective and temporal knowledge and the subjective and eternal power; Shelley also addresses the difference between factual stories and imaginative poetry: “a story is a catalogue of detached facts, which have no other bond of connection than time, place, circumstance, cause and effect.” (679) Compared to story, a poem “is the creation of actions according to the unchangeable forms of human nature, as existing in the mind of the creator, which is itself the image of all other minds.” (679-680) The capitalised Literature and Poetry both imply an ideal belief in the value of art, transcending individual idiosyncrasies and situational facts, which could only be appreciated by a higher sensibility in humanity. Believing in common humanity, Shelley proposes a shared subjectivity in the minds of the creator

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<sup>52</sup> Percy Bysshe Shelley, *The Major Works including Poetry, Prose, and Drama*. Edited by Zachary Leader and Michael O’Neill. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 679.

as well as in the minds of the readers. By appealing to a shared human sensibility, “the image in all other minds”, poetry connects the nature of humanity within us. Agreeing with De Quincey’s belief in the power of literature bestowed upon readers and the sympathetic power of understanding called forth through literature’s transcendental conjuration of human nature, Shelley states that poetry “is universal, and contains within itself the germ of a relation to whatever motives or actions have place in the possible varieties of human nature.” (680)

In De Quincey’s literary theory, the debate on the power of literature is an idealistic one. To argue for the power of literature is to believe in the transcendental and the utopian as attributes of the literary. Shelley advocates similar ideals of poetry in society in *A Defence for Poetry*, written in response to Peacock,. The ideal function of poetry in Shelley’s formulation is not a pragmatic type with utilitarian purposes but a philosophical inspiration that appeals to human spirituality. In Shelley’s scheme, “Poetry, in a general sense, may be defined to be ‘the expression of the Imagination’: and Poetry is connate with the origin of man.” (675) Both Shelley and De Quincey propose a power above the formal rigidity of genre differentiation. In Shelley’s words: “The distinction between poets and prose-writers is a vulgar error” (679) because the Poetry that literature should address, like the power of literature, is to “kindle a harmony in thoughts divested of shape and action” rather than “invent[ing] any regular plan of rhythm which would include, under determinate forms, the carried pauses of... style.” (679) In Shelley’s theory, compliance with the differentiation between genres diminishes the harmonious power of literature and the transcendental poetic of literary works. Despite one being a prose writer and the other a recognised poet, De Quincey and Shelley mutually explain and reinforce each other’s literary ideas and practice, and the literary beliefs are not incompatible.

De Quincey’s elaboration of literature of power finds corresponding ideas in

Shelley's poetics, which exhibits the direct inheritance from the Romantic belief in sentimentality. The power in conjuring the hidden yet shared human sentiment also anticipates Woolf's artistic effort in incorporating a similar ethos in her novels. Schug claims "Woolf's great contribution to modern fiction is the successful imposition on the novel, a primarily narrative form, of a "self-satisfying inner order, a non-logical continuity" in order to penetrate and to express in a fictional mode the inner, subjective world of experience." (192) In Woolf's own critical essays, she constantly emphasises a turn away from a materialistic approach and the superficial Edwardian treatment of characters and engages herself in an inner narrative that transcends the difference between individuals and appeals to a higher level of human nature. Woolf's devotion in bringing out the poetics in her novels echoes the most prominent traits in De Quincey's writing; it also enables her to probe into the dark psychology of human experiences.

Frye observes this distinction between the thing as known and the power that resides in the essence of things in his study of Romanticism: "There is a world 'behind' the objects we see, and a world 'behind' the subjects that perceive it; these hidden worlds are the same world; poetry is the voice of that world."<sup>53</sup> This summarises De Quincey's preoccupation with the human mind very well and explains Woolf's modernist writing and the inspiration she absorbs from Romantic ancestors. Separating things into the appearance and the essential also corresponds to a Kantian understanding of noumenon and phenomenon. However, just as De Quincey's dependence on mundane activities and objects such as the experience of riding with the mail-coach and taking opium, a total abstraction of meaning is not embraced. If the human mind is the foundation of De Quincey's theory, it is because the world acts upon it and is also reflected by it. A pure metaphysical retreat to the human mind is

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<sup>53</sup> Northrop Frye, *A Study of English Romanticism* (New York: Random House, 1968), 111-112.

not De Quincey's explanation of life. The same idea is argued in Woolf's "The Cosmos"; she questions the value of metaphysical trance of thought and claims it is prone to slip into the absurd when "Everything seems to suffer a curious magnification. Nothing exists in itself but only as a means to something else."<sup>54</sup> In both De Quincey and Woolf, what has been put in the process of repositioning and readjusting is the self in relation to the world as expressed in their autobiographical endeavours of defining themselves; with this in mind, though transcendentalism is suggested to balance an over-reaching materialistic approach, a total diminishment of the self is not in the end a valuable pursuit for either of them.

#### A Revolt against Genre Differentiation and the Choice of Autobiography

De Quincey's use of the literature of power bears a strong influence from his peers, especially Wordsworth and Coleridge. Delvin suggests that De Quincey's use of power is close to Wordsworth and Coleridge's use of "imagination" (78). Clej suggests that the distinction between the literature of power and the literature of knowledge "parallels the distinction between objective and subjective forms of knowledge in the essay "Style," where De Quincey views power as an essential attribute of subjective forms of expression." (195) Situated closely among the Romantic lake poets literarily and geographically, De Quincey is widely known not for his poetry but for his creative prose and critical essays. However, this should not therefore lead to an underestimation of the poetic emphasis in his prose writing. De Quincey's prose writing evinces, in Jordan's words, a "painstaking mastery of assonance, alliteration, balance, swelling and falling rhythms, and haunting and evocative diction" (Jordan 1973, xv); all of which bear obvious characteristics of

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<sup>54</sup> Virginia Woolf, "The Cosmos" in *The Captain's Death Bed* (London: Hogarth Press, 1950), 82. Hereafter cited with abbreviation, *CDB*.

Romantic poetry. As De Quincey's most significant stylistic achievement, the mode of impassioned prose represents a different characteristic of prose writing, shifted "the values of familiar things... [and] makes us wonder whether, the prose writer, the novelist, might not capture fuller and finer truths than are now his aim if he ventured into those shadowy regions where De Quincey has been before him." (*GR*, 40)

Though known for his prose writing, De Quincey successfully broke the boundary between prose and poetry and incorporates the ideas and nuances of Romantic poetry into his narrative, making a new blend with the freedom of prose and the transcendentalism of poetry.

Though De Quincey endeavours to encourage poetic justice in genres other than poetry, De Quincey understands that it is not the formal modes of a particular genre that hinders the expression of its poetics. As argued earlier, it is the substance that takes precedence. In De Quincey's attitude towards the novel, there is an evidently dialectical relationship between form and content. In "De Quincey's Conception of the Novel as Literature of Power",<sup>55</sup> Charles Patterson examines De Quincey's valorisation of the novel which, at the first sight, questions the category of the genre of novel but, under closer inspection, recognises its literary power. According to De Quincey, the literature of knowledge aims to teach and speak to discursive understanding, whereas the literature of power aims to move and operate "on and through that humid light which clothes itself in the mists and glittering iris of human passions, desires, and genial emotions." (XI, 55) Following De Quincey's distinction between books of factual knowledge and spiritual power, Patterson is right to point out that because the novel is concerned "too largely with *knowledge* of external and temporal aspects of its age" (377) De Quincey does not take novels in a serious

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<sup>55</sup> Charles Patterson, "De Quincey's Conception of the Novel as Literature of Power", *PMLA*, Vol. 70, (1955): 375-89.

manner. However, De Quincey also defines what constitutes the literature of power in 1823, and among the exclusive attributes of the literature of power is “the vicarious excitation of emotions which ordinary life rarely stimulate.” (378) De Quincey’s reservation about novels lies in the matter, the substance, rather than its manner, the form. De Quincey regards novels as an ephemeral form of literature because novels aim largely to provide instant excitement, instead of attempting to stir those deeper, inner emotions, and the insight of life which contributes to the immortality of art. Novelists, in De Quincey’s eyes, turn their focus towards mortal and transient fashion, and have no intention of creating classics:

A writer of this day, either in England or France, to be *very* popular, must be a story teller—which is a function of literature neither very noble in itself, nor secondly, tending to permanence. A popular writer, therefore, who, in order to be popular, must speak through novels, speaks to what is least permanent in human sensibilities...(IV, 296)

The lack of insight and prospect account for the faults of novels; this reflects De Quincey’s own literary pursuit as well as his expectation of future fame and acknowledgement. Transcendental as the literature of power is, De Quincey is also preoccupied with the longevity of his reputation. Patterson suggests that for De Quincey, the ultimate value of literature is in its appeal to the world of inward feelings and this idea originates from the influences of the poetry of the Romantic Movement. De Quincey may not have witnessed the evolution that had taken place in the novel, nor the way in which his encounter with an ideal Romantic poetics had spread into other types of writings, but his ideas widely influenced later prose writers such as Virginia Woolf.

Bearing in mind De Quincey’s career as a prose writer, De Quincey’s own elaboration of literary power might be interpreted as a rejection of rigid genre definitions. Clej suggests that “Poised unevenly between the first generation of



Romantics and the major Victorians, De Quincey can easily appear as a minor, erratic figure.” (Clej, 5) Though the acquaintance with Wordsworth and Coleridge contributes greatly to De Quincey’s writings, De Quincey’s friendship with Wordsworth and Coleridge was an uneasy one. De Quincey embraced Wordsworth’s poetry and was among the very few readers of *The Prelude*; but as their relationship proceeded, this benevolent father figure “gradually became for De Quincey a silent, imaginary opponent.” (Clej, 6) The anxiety was evident and became worse after the two became estranged. Through Wordsworth’s introduction, however, De Quincey is inspired by Coleridge and his philosophical knowledge, but De Quincey transforms the source of Coleridge’s crippling addiction to opium into his own literary muse. De Quincey is ambivalent about Coleridge’s opium-eating while holding a tolerant view of his own addiction, and both of them criticised the other for their own addictions.

Unlike Wordsworth and Coleridge, “Nature was not his muse” and the beauty of the lakes and hills that galvanise imaginations for poetry little effects De Quincey; De Quincey’s Romanticism takes a different shape and form in opium-incited prose writing. Clej agrees with Woolf’s comment on De Quincey in “Impassioned Prose” that De Quincey “made a class for himself”. De Quincey might be seen as an odd writer among the Romantic poets, but he delivers an exemplary style of prose writing by “stand[ing] obstinately across the boundary lines, and do[ing] a greater service by enlarging and fertilizing and influencing” (*GR*, 34). Woolf’s comment on De Quincey acknowledges his unconventional presence among the Romantic writers, but also finds a possible answer for this prose in his writing where the challenging of norms is encouraged and practiced. De Quincey’s belief in literary power is not only shared in Shelley’s poetics but also carried forward into Woolf’s ambition in creating a new genre for modernist writing that she calls the art of fiction, in which the form of fiction is to pursue poetic ideas and address the higher power of human sentimentality.

The approach De Quincey takes in addressing the human mind is through autobiographical writing; his own colourful mental activities are a suitable vehicle through which to explore the power of literature as well as the power of the mind. When Wordsworth and Coleridge see in nature the power of harmony, for De Quincey, the harmonious power lies in literature, uniting human thoughts and experiences for De Quincey. Clej observes that for De Quincey, “Power appears to signify the writer’s ability to summon and communicate new forms of sensibility, and endeavour that in itself may take the form of a power struggle.” (195) De Quincey’s autobiographical writing becomes De Quincey’s field of power struggle as a writer trying to organise his life story into harmonious power of representation. Wordsworth’s search for self-knowledge is the growth of a poet’s mind. De Quincey praises *The Prelude* as working against the fashions of the day, because Wordsworth’s poetry “presupposed a difficult process of weaning, and an effort of discipline for reorganizing the whole internal economy of the sensibilities.”<sup>56</sup> Clej suggests that Wordsworth’s poetry acts as an anchor point of literature in the Romantic era; it is only when set against Wordsworth that “Writers can position themselves to defend their turf, to oppose the pressure or inertia of the audience, and to impose a new form of sensibility.” (196)

While Wordsworth’s poetic autobiography serves as a literary manifesto for the literary world to follow, De Quincey’s autobiographies provides a different challenge. De Quincey is not engaged in projecting his inner growth as much as in communicating his visions and dreams induced by opium while at the same time oddly defending his habit. Often in De Quincey’s *Confessions*, he evinces special pleading for his failure to overcome his addiction and for the premature claim to have abjured opium. De Quincey humorously justifies himself in case the readers “find that

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<sup>56</sup> Thomas De Quincey, *Recollections of the Lakes and the Lake Poets* (London: Penguin, 1970), 172. Hereafter cited with abbreviation, *RLP*.

the Opium-eater boasteth himself to be a philosopher... the phantasmagoria of *his* dreams (waking or sleeping, day-dreams or night-dreams) is suitable to one who in that character, *Humani nihil a se alienum putat.*” (5) Though accused by Coleridge of surreptitiously encouraging opium-eating, De Quincey always shows an eagerness to acclaim the benefits of his opium-eating habit in order to counteract negative impressions of the habit that he may have conveyed to his readers. Clej concludes that “unlike Wordsworth’s poetic ethos, De Quincey’s heroism is that of the underdog, the failed man, the ‘moral sublime’ of the opium eater who is able to rise above his ‘polluted’ condition.” (197) De Quincey sees his own power in his *Confessions* as that of introducing a philosophical mind with the vision enhanced by opium; these visions are revelatory and shed light on the mysterious realm of the human mind.

#### Murder: The Dark Genre of Fine Art

The power of literature itself requires good readers. While suggesting the educational potential of literature, De Quincey implicitly expects an elite readership that has the cultivated ability to appreciate art. To reach the minds of the readers through the literature of power is to bring out the required real taste for fine art in the readers. For De Quincey, the capitalised Literature of power does not have to confine itself in the form of written language because the Literature of power is an idealised concept having the character of fine art. As Clej suggests, power can be the heroism in a power struggle. In 1827, De Quincey confirms again his focus on matter over means and extends his ideas on power to the darker side of fine art and hence talks about the relation between fine art and taste in *On Murder in Blackwood’s Magazine*. The discussion on fine art and cultivated taste is manifested in the appreciation of murder and the ability to see artistic elements in cruelty.

As one of the bloodiest and most brutal crimes of the time, the Williams murder gripped and terrified much of London in 1811. The indefinite motive and ruthless execution of the murder make it a horrifying but intriguing topic for recurring discussions. In *On the Knocking at the Gate in Macbeth*, De Quincey praised the Williams's murder without disguises. De Quincey thinks Williams's début, which brought Williams "a brilliant and undying reputation" (4), creates: "an ill effect, by making the connoisseur in murder very fastidious in his taste, and dissatisfied with any thing that has been since done in that line. All other murders look pale by the deep crimson of his." (4) Williams's murder is "crimsoned" by the bloodshed of many victims and by the dazzling effect of the performance. The discussions, bewilderment, fear and even amusement aroused by Williams's murder creates an artistic status for the act itself. Williams's murder, as a powerful piece of art, does nothing to instruct, to amuse, nor communicate knowledge. De Quincey is convinced that the artistry and the affect aroused by Williams's murder is unparalleled, and leaves a profound impact on the feelings of its spectators. Williams's murder exceeds the general understanding of murder because it embodies and conveys feelings more than that of the commonly expected one of fear but also an inexplicable enjoyment in the eyes of the beholders. Williams "has exalted the ideal of murder" (*KGM*, 10) by setting up a supreme model of its kind; his act outperforms all others with its powerful composition and paradoxically elevates the taste of its spectators:

People begin to see that something more goes to the composition of a fine murder than two blockheads to kill and to be killed—a knife—a purse—and a dark lane. Design, gentlemen, grouping, light and shade, poetry, sentiment, are now deemed indispensable to attempts of this nature. (*KGM*, 10)

De Quincey reads the Williams murder as a piece of art work to be viewed, criticised, and appreciated by connoisseurs; he proclaims the performance of Williams, which,

like those of the fine arts, exceeds rustic and unsophisticated killings and transfers to its spectators a delicate and ineffable sensational bombardment that can be experienced only when its spectators rely upon feelings rather than understanding. Breaking the limit of conventional forms is not only an expectation of the work of art, it is also an important mindset expected of its educated readers.

Though in a whimsical tone, in *On Murder* De Quincey explicitly expresses his emphasis on taste through distorted quotation from Lactantius: “Human life is guarded by laws of the uttermost rigour, yet custom devised a mode of evading them on behalf of murder; and the demands of taste (*voluptas*) are now become the same as those of abandoned guilt.”<sup>57</sup> Ethical standards are no longer the dominant value of all things, and morals ought to be temporarily suspended in order to experience the artistic flavour in murder. As De Quincey suggests, a cultured taste leads to mental and intellectual freedom from social confinements. Woolf in “The Death of the Moth” touches on a similar topic of the overwhelming power of death and the awe and beauty she experiences oddly in the presence of death. Watching “the extraordinary efforts made by those tiny legs against an oncoming doom”, Woolf says: “nothing, I knew, had any chance against death.”<sup>58</sup> Woolf observes the struggle of the moth with its insignificant but pure form of life where death comes as a sweeping and irresistible force. With the feeling of being inevitably powerless, a strange surrender and sense of awe replace the predominance of fear. Like De Quincey’s analysis of Williams’s murder, Woolf says “One’s sympathies, of course, were all on the side of life.” (11) The struggle of the moth in the face of death is a moving struggle for life, but the power of death is just as intriguing as Williams’s murder. Woolf says: “As I looked at

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<sup>57</sup> Thomas De Quincey, “On Murder Considered as One of The Fine Arts” in *On Murder* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 9. Hereafter cited with abbreviation, *MFA*.

<sup>58</sup> Virginia Woolf, “The Death of the Moth” in *The Death of the Moth and Other Essays* (London: Hogarth Press, 1942), 11. Hereafter cited with abbreviation, *DM*.

the dead moth, this minute wayside triumph of so great a force over so mean an antagonist filled me with wonder.” (11) Such power of death that Woolf is interested in illustrates itself most satisfactorily when the two forces collide, when death is contrasted with the struggle of the moth. Though the moth seems to say “O yes,...death is stronger than I am” (11), what Woolf finds inspiring is the moth’s dance, the striving for and performance of life.

When Woolf sees in the struggle of the moth over the power of death, De Quincey also learns to appreciate the artistic cast of murder. De Quincey’s enthusiasm about murder is apparent when he speaks of the murderer and the artist in the same breath. Both are to him “interested in pleasure and power, and both seek freedom by outstripping or subverting the social institutions they feel thwart or confine them.”<sup>59</sup> Communicating directly with the audience through his act, Williams the murderer translates his strong will into powerful actions; he becomes the artist with irresistible mastery and transcends social confinements with which De Quincey seems eager to identify. Being an opium addict, De Quincey occupies a similar position as a morality breaker and a social exile like the forsaken murderer; he constantly shows an extended sympathy with the murderer. By means of creation, the murderer is engaged in a self-assertive act and breaks through what is socially imposed on him. The murderer displayed a wilful act that overthrows social constraints. De Quincey’s sympathy originates from an implicit spiritual identification with Williams’s social position, as well as from a feeling of envy of the precise and powerful execution of individual will that was carried out Williams’s murder.

The extreme brutality of the Williams’s murder puts De Quincey in mind of reading *Macbeth*. De Quincey holds that it is proper to rely “on [his] own feeling in

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<sup>59</sup> Robert Morrison, “Introduction” in *On Murder* by Thomas De Quincey (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), xi.

opposition to [his] understanding” (*KGM*, 4) in order to answer the effects both Williams’s murder and *Macbeth* bring to him—those of power. It is the power that delivers a numbing sense of amazement exhibited by the murderer that captures De Quincey’s attention:

Murder in ordinary cases, where the sympathy is wholly directed to the case of the murdered person, is an incident of coarse and vulgar horror... Such attitude would little suit the purpose of the poet... But in the murderer, such a murderer as a poet will condescend to, there must be raging some great passion, — jealousy, ambition, vengeance, hatred, — which will create a hell within him; and into this hell we are to look.  
(*KGM*, 5)

Exercising not the faculty of logic and reason but feelings, De Quincey urges readers to employ “sympathy of understanding” (*KGM*, 5) to enter the murderer’s mind and to feel the undertone behind the actions. It is not the superficial act that De Quincey is interested in; it is always the covert and mysterious motivation that he wishes to accentuate. The hell within the murderer stands as nodal point of all questions as the primitive libido that generates actions. De Quincey praises the psychological depth of the murderer, suggesting the Williams’s murder is not simply a reckless act. As the literature of power, it is wholly about substance—design, motive, and performance. The act of murder is accompanied by a story full of tension and impulses and leaves a long resonating effect on its readers. De Quincey proposes that readers are not only to read these actions but, just as Woolf understands the power of death and the creativity that death brings to life, so his readers too should probe into the intention of the murder in order to understand its power and the revelation that it might bring to the understanding of humanity.

### Sympathy of Understanding

In order to probe into the substance of a work of art, De Quincey urges that it is the

“hell” within the artist that we should investigate. But such sympathetic understanding is not easily achieved—it requires a submission of reason to the faculty of taste. To support his own argument of suspending rationality, it is noted by De Quincey that when one relies too much upon logical understanding, the negative consequence is the tyranny of the eyes (i.e. the intuitive perception of things is overruled and obliterated by understanding (*KGM*, 4)). Ignorance induced by an overconfident belief in reason hinders the development of sensibility. Bearing in mind the moral defects of the murderer, De Quincey still proposes that murders could also “be treated aesthetically, as in German philosophy, in relation to good taste” (*MFA*, 11). In other words, in order to appreciate the Williams’s murder, or the tragedy of *Macbeth*, a cultivated taste helps to see behind logic and morality. The taste is not a scholarly expertise, but sensibility and intuitions that belong not to the realm of logic and reason, nor to that of morality and ethics, but to that of human sensibility and its sympathetic capacity. Communication between the murder and the audience is achieved through the work of power stimulating the mind, a faculty which can only be exercised through the resonance of feeling and emotions.

De Quincey suggests the Williams’s murder cannot be judged from moral perspectives, but “must be insulated—cut off by an immeasurable gulph from the ordinary tide and succession of human affairs” (*KGM*, 10) to be aesthetically understood. In other words, readers are like writers; they are encouraged to partake in the creative mental activity of suspending reality and embracing imagination. The power of art is a joint accomplishment of the author and the readers. De Quincey advises his readers to take a distant position from the world of routine in order to make aesthetic judgments:

...we must be made sensible that the world of ordinary life is suddenly arrested—laid asleep—tranced—racked into a dread armistice: time must



be annihilated; relation to things without abolished; and all must pass self-withdrawn into a deep syncope and suspension of earthly passion.  
(KGM, 6)

This is the extension of the “sympathy of understanding”, the ability to dispense with any prejudice and presupposition. By dispensing with usual standpoints, readers are able to experience step by step the suspension from ordinary life, the emerging of the surreal world of creation, and the resuming of their ongoing human life. Real meanings, De Quincey believes, unfold in succeeding contrasts, because “All action in any direction is best expounded, measured, and made apprehensible, by reaction.”

(KGM, 6) Reactions to the successive phases of the event, alongside those rebounds of feelings in the mind of the spectators, constitute a definition of artistic performance. The potential of aesthetics does not only reside in the work, but also depends upon the readers’ taste. As De Quincey states in *On Knocking*:

Oh! mighty poet!—Thy works are not as those of other men, simply and merely great works of art; but are also like the phenomena of nature... which are to be studied with entire *submission of our own faculties*. (7, my italics)

Only with the entire submission of the faculty of reason, does De Quincey believe that we are to discover “arrangements where the careless eye had seen nothing but accident.” (KGM, 7) De Quincey parallels the appreciation of artificial creation with that of natural phenomena and echoes Kantian philosophy in suggesting that the greatest art is not the imitation of nature, but an embodiment and appreciation of nature. In order to obtain the moment of revelation, through an appreciation of beauty in nature, the submission of understanding to feeling is the alternate option in De Quincey’s writing, but such proposition also designates the unresolved tension still existing between aesthetic enjoyment and ethical values, between fine art and mundane experiences.

The author behind a work should be recognised, so should the motive inside the

author. Therefore, the “hell” within the murderer cannot be separated from the deeds he commits and it is through the sympathy of understanding that we are able to read the inner turbulences and consequential action of the murderer. The “sympathy of understanding” that De Quincey is so much concerned with reminds us of the indulgence he asked from his readers in the *Confessions of an English Opium-Eater*. This leads us to suspect that when De Quincey refers to the mighty poet in the previous quotation, he also refers to his own moral scars which he pleads to be understood and overlooked. Though the beauty of life is contrasted and presented with the horror brought by death and hell, De Quincey’s own “hell” provides clues to his preoccupation with the contradiction of aesthetics and ethics aroused in murders as well as the power of sympathetic understanding.

De Quincey’s obsession with the contradictions and ambivalences that spring up in the confrontation of aesthetics and ethics is apparent early in the *Confessions*. In the *Confessions*, De Quincey introduces what opium reveals to him; opium opens up the world of celestial pleasure as well as of demonic pain. Very often paralysed by his addiction and an ambivalent sense of guilt, De Quincey is convinced that the morally refutable opium addiction is what triggers his chaotic sensory extremity. The power of opium leads to the world of theatrical dreams and calls “into sunny light the faces of long-buried beauties, and the blessed household countenances, cleansed from the ‘dishonours of the grave’”; soothes the “wounds that will never heal” and brings to guilty man “the hopes of his youth.” (COE, 49) Opium, the panacea of all, brings to him the grotesque dreams, the extension of imagination, and the knowledge of the mind that De Quincey sought to justify. A new world is illuminated and awaits his exploration with the generous help of opium. Yet, regardless of De Quincey’s laborious attempts at self-justification, he is aware of his moral failings in taking opium and he promises in the *Confessions* that he will quit the “fascinating

enthralment with a religious zeal.” (2) De Quincey had never succeeded in renouncing opium; but he is also more intriguingly addicted to the transcendental chaos brought by opium and is obsessed with the way in which it allows him to reflect on the stalemate between aesthetic enjoyment and ethical judgments. The proposition in *On Murder*—“[e]nough has been given to morality; now comes the turn of Taste and the Fine Arts” (12) — does not only apply to the Williams murder, but also to himself, the artist and the opium-eater.

### The Kantian Sublime and Disinterestedness

De Quincey praises the disinterested power that literature delivers, and he sees in murder the feeling of the sublime, which is capable of elevating human sensations. In *On Murder*, De Quincey proposes that: “as it is impossible to hammer anything out of it for moral purposes, let us treat it aesthetically.” (13) Aesthetic treatment is De Quincey’s proposition to replace morality. In the case of murder, everyone “has the right to gratify his taste” (11) because chances are even when “[w]e dry up our tears, and have the satisfaction perhaps to discover, that a transaction, which, morally considered, was shocking, and without a leg to stand upon, when tried by principles of Taste, [a murder] turns out to be a very meritorious performance.” (13) De Quincey sounds frivolous in celebrating the merits of murder and renouncing morality, but his real interest is in Taste and the anticipated feelings of the sublime. In Kantian philosophy, with which De Quincey was very much familiar: “A pure judgement about the sublime... must have no purpose whatsoever of the object as the basis of determining it, if it is to be aesthetic and not mingled with some judgement of understanding or of reason.”<sup>60</sup> De Quincey wants art to be viewed purely as a

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<sup>60</sup> Immanuel Kant, “§26: On Estimating the Magnitude of Natural Things, as We Must for the Idea of the Sublime” in *Critique of Judgement*, trans. Werner S. Pluhar (Cambridge: Hackett Publishing

category outside of moral judgement. Emphasising the pure aesthetic autonomy of art, both Kant and De Quincey avoid looking at art from a utilitarian perspective. It is not because art should provide no moral functions, but because morality, as a socially constructed prejudice, can become the encumbrance that holds the readers back and leads therefore to the diminishing of feelings of sublimity; in De Quincey's eyes it is this feeling which enhances a higher level of intellectual enlightenment regarding the knowledge of self.

Edmund Burke argues, in *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, that sublimity that agitates the mind resides in things that cause pain, terror or passion in human feelings.<sup>61</sup> The sublime does not belong to the dominance of reason, logic science. Sublimity can be understood as a direct connection between a perceived object and the perceiving mind, regardless of any limits or boundaries, which generates overwhelming experiences in the subject. Reading the pains, terrors and passions brought on by the Williams murder, De Quincey regards sublimity as potentiality existing in artificial creations, which brings about the negation of reality and the transcendence of the boundary between the world of understanding and that of intuitive perception. Williams, De Quincey writes in *On Murder*, "has carried his art to a point of a colossal sublime; and as Wordsworth observes, has in a manner 'created the taste by which he is to be enjoyed'." (10) The brutality of the Williams's murder brings its spectators unfamiliar feelings of awe; a masochistic pleasure which comes with negative emotional bombardment. Presupposing a hierarchy of nature, Kant holds that artificial creation merely produces things that possess the coherence of a natural organism.<sup>62</sup> As argued in Kantian

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Company, 1987), 109. Following quotes from the same source will be cited with section number and page number.

<sup>61</sup> Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990).

<sup>62</sup> Andrew Bowie, *Aesthetics and Subjectivity: From Kant to Nietzsche* (Manchester: Manchester

philosophy, turbulences of human beings only illustrate the monstrous nature of men and human flaws are the proof of the imperfection of human beings.

De Quincey sees human flaws in a different light; he believes “the truth is, that, however objectionable *per se*, yet, relatively to others of their class, both a thief and an ulcer may have infinite degrees of merit.” (MFA, 12) De Quincey is not stalled by the imperfection of things and says: “They are both imperfections, it is true; but to be imperfect being their essence, the very greatness of their imperfection becomes their perfection.” (MFA, 12) When Kant sees human flaws from an idealist and transcendental perspective, De Quincey looks at the issue sympathetically from the point of a flawed writer and an advocate of the sympathy of understanding. The perfection of humanity is manifested in its imperfect nature and the struggle to overcome. When referring to a thief or an ulcer, De Quincey expresses a tolerant view towards human failings, suggesting that it is only when imperfection is embedded in perfection, does perfection have a higher value of striving for perfection. De Quincey’s attitude to the limits of human beings and the imperfections of men, which is the same as the “sympathy of understanding” he proposes, enables him to see the human endeavours to transcend and better because “even imperfection itself may have its ideal or perfect state” (MFA, 12). Recognising the struggle to reach for perfection within the limit of inevitable imperfection is the rationale underlying De Quincey’s playful narration in *On Murder*.

### The Moments of Revelation

Kant defines sublimity as to “be sought only in the mind of the judging person, not in the natural object the judging of which prompts this mental attunement.” (§26, 113)

Sublimity is an act and a movement of the mind: “even to be able to think proves that the mind has a power surpassing any standard of sense.” (§25, 106) Kant deems that sublimity is the power of imagination that attunes the human mind to outer objects; the definite object is not in itself sublime. In other words, sublimity, in the Kantian view, depends upon the reflexive imagination of the spectators, the “attunement that the intellect gets through a certain presentation that occupies reflective judgement.” (§25, 106) Sublimity does not exist in the perceived objects, Kant argues, but is the affect recognised in the perceiving person. The emphasis is shifted to the spectators, asking for exercise of taste as De Quincey proposes. Differences perceived in each individual mark the function of taste, which is regarded both by Kant and De Quincey as the ability to respond to sublimity. Kant suggests that the sublime comes from boundless or formless grandeur, which brings a sense of chaos: “it is rather in its chaos that nature arouses our idea of the sublime.” (§23, 99)

Confronting chaotic and formless experiences, Kant believes the subject’s inadequacy in comprehending the object becomes apparent, resulting in a temporary disorientation inside of the subject. Senses of the sublime are accompanied by suspension from ordinary currents, and unfamiliarity takes over direct understanding of everyday life. As Kant puts it, a judgement for the sublime is not “a judgement of sense or a logically determinative one” (§23, 97), it is the faculty of feelings and of the mind that perceives and rationality simply works to comprehend the subject’s inadequacy when confronting chaos. The mind resonates directly with the perceived object without the help of reason or symbols. Transcending the world and the forgetting of consciousness contribute to the aesthetic experience of the sublime. De Quincey shares Kant’s notion that at such particular moments, when overwhelmed by awe and confusion, the ethical is subordinate to the aesthetic. What appeals to De Quincey the most is the escape from ethical confinement brought by the Williams

murder as well as by other branches of aesthetic sublimity.

The subject is freed from morality, but only temporarily; Kant indicates that when thrown into chaos, the subject confronts not only sublimity, but also his own predicaments in comprehension: “For what is sublime... cannot be contained in any sensible form... though they cannot be exhibited adequately, are aroused and called to mind by this very inadequacy.” (§23, 99) Confronting the inability to comprehend the sublime, the subject loses the sense of the self, and the boundary of his or her subjectivity crumbles as he or she recognises the limits of his own imagination, upon which one builds the knowledge of the self. McDonagh concludes that the disillusionment of subjectivity and the feeling of the sublime “brings about the ascendancy of the rational over the sensual, but it cannot compensate for the subject’s fundamental deficiencies that are exposed in the face of the unrepresentable object.”<sup>63</sup> At the moment of sensory extremity, the subject experiences a suspension from ordinary life as well as a close threat to his subjectivity, because “in what we usually call sublime in nature there is such an utter lack of anything leading to particular objective principles and to forms of nature conforming to them.” (§23, 99) The imagination of the subject is thwarted, and the totality of ideas is challenged. Thus, by pushing the limit of sensory experiences and recognising the boundary of subjectivity, a further attempt to define and re-define the self is triggered.

As Crowther suggests in *The Kantian Sublime*, “[t]he feeling of the sublime is a feeling which is deeply bound up with our instinct for self-preservation.”<sup>64</sup> The subject is frustrated by the confrontation of the sublime, but refuses to be defeated. The inadequacy, Kant suggests, “is the arousal in us of the feeling that we have within us a supersensible power” (§25, 196), and such power brings a further expansion of

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<sup>63</sup> Josephine McDonagh, *De Quincey’s Discipline* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 126-7.

<sup>64</sup> Paul Crowther, *The Kantian Sublime: From Morality to Art* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), p. 8.

our imagination. With the Cartesian concepts in mind, McDonagh holds that “in order to be, gaining self-affirmation through self-consciousness, the greatest self-affirmation was reached through consciousness of the limits of his own existence.” (145)

Reaching one’s limit may seem frustrating, but it generates a will to conquer such difficulty and to reinstatement of the subject “in the wake of its dissolution” (127), as McDonagh terms it. It echoes De Quincey’s compliments to glories that stem from struggle and calamity, the essential imperfection, to achieve greater satisfaction. The feeling of the sublime, Kant concludes, “is a pleasure that arises only indirectly: it is produced by the feeling of a momentary inhibition of the vital forces followed immediately by an outpouring of them that is all the stronger.” (§23, 98) Placed between the tension of the ethical and the aesthetic, the subject cultivates an advanced care of the self that originates from such complex sensory experiences.

The subject is not utterly defeated when brought to the verge of his/ her subjectivity; on the contrary, a will to overcome is generated. Kant reads such experience as a negative pleasure, which is not a playful enjoyment but serious and profound. It also symbolises a quest for improvement; not the improvement of the world but an internalised upgrading of the self. Thus, when ethics submerged by aesthetics, what follows is a stronger will for amelioration. De Quincey’s notion of ethics and aesthetics is akin to that of Kant. He comments on *On Murder* that:

The world in general, gentlemen, are very bloody-minded; and all they want in a murder is a copious effusion of blood; gaudy display in this point is enough for *them*. But the enlightened connoisseur is more refined in his taste; and from our art, as from all the other liberal arts when thoroughly cultivated, the result is—to improve and to humanize the heart. (32)

Once again, De Quincey emphasises the importance of taste, which distinguishes laypeople from refined connoisseurs. With the help of taste in appreciating art, the subject is exposed to the feeling of his or her own inadequacy and is given the



opportunity to produce a will to advance. What the murder brings to us, De Quincey suggests, “is precisely the same as that of Tragedy, in Aristotle’s account of it, viz. ‘to cleanse the heart by means of pity and terror’.” (32) The human striving expressed in the Kantian sublime is what De Quincey has been requesting from his readers, a cultivated taste, which in itself is a power called forth to improve and elevate on the basis of an innate human capacity. Like Wordsworth’s poetry and De Quincey’s own confessions, murders and dark arts, these sublime moments are new forms of pushing the limits of human sensation. The power that flows in these examples is the ultimate embodiment of De Quincey’s Literature of Power.

De Quincey’s sublime enlightenment is deeply related to his understanding of the self. These moments of the sublime are key points of self-revelation; through these moments, the subject’s self-knowledge is enhanced. De Quincey’s philosophical investigation of these moments is transformed into Woolf’s literary illustration of the modern epiphany. Woolf’s moments are inwardly related to those buried experiences like De Quincey’s own childhood memories. However, they both certify the existence of being which Woolf calls “those moments of being” (*MB*, 83). Woolf endeavours to represent these moments of revelations in her novels, bringing to her readers a truthful picture of her life since childhood. Inheriting De Quincey’s literary quest of power and the revolt against tradition, Woolf’s task is to establish a poetics of prose writing and establish a cornerstone for building her art of fiction.

## **Chapter Two:**

### **Woolf's Art of Fiction**

As a novelist, Woolf is engaged in more than story telling; through her stories she tries to develop her own aesthetics of fiction that might respond to the social and cultural atmosphere of her own time. Impressed by the idea of De Quincey's literature of power articulated through his impassioned prose, Woolf is driven by an ambition to create her own poetics of prose. Woolf's considerable number of essays and reviews are evidence of her devotion to the art of literary criticism and testimony to her prolific writing career as a novelist. Her literary criticism is closely related to the mission she assigned to herself which is to establish a proper name and place for fictional writing among literary genres. As an active member in the culturally and intellectually advanced Bloomsbury group and situated in the socially and politically unstable early twentieth century, Woolf stood at the intersection of old traditions and new ideas and looked for a place to make her own contribution. Multiple artistic and scientific discourses from all disciplines cast their direct or indirect influences upon Woolf's literary criticism. The focus of this chapter examines Woolf's literary ideas and observes how she shaped her theory of the novel in relation to the intellectual ferments of her time.

It is important to understand that Woolf's literary criticism does not exist as a single body of work, but is scattered throughout her essays and practiced in her own novels. Fragmented as it is, there is much to be gained from understanding her theory of modern fiction. In the same way as critics find it hard to systematically summarise De Quincey's literary criticism, Woolf also requires careful observation to study her dispersed theoretical insights. As a novelist, Woolf constantly focuses on, and thinks

through, the broad but inseparable relation to man, art and modern life. Woolf never imposes rigid laws and conventions for fiction; her “art of fiction” keeps evolving in her own writing of literary criticism and modernist novels. This chapter also investigates Woolf’s modernist aesthetic with special regard to Romanticism as well as the ideas and logic behind her devotion to the peculiar challenges of being a modern novelist.

### De Quincey’s “Impassioned Prose”

Romantic literature is not merely an object of distant nostalgia; it is a source of inspiration for Woolf. Addressing Virginia Woolf and her relations with her precursors, Steve Ellis, in *Virginia Woolf and the Victorians*,<sup>65</sup> proposes that her literary upbringing, whilst being a burden, also nourishes Woolf’s creative imagination and nurtures Woolf’s prominent concern with the sentimentality of modern individuals. Victorian literature provides a realistic view of the world; however, Woolf’s need for a corrective lens to represent modern life and human emotions finds a sense of affinity in Romantic poetics. The Romantic focus on the human mind gives Woolf an anchor point in her attempt to capture and describe the nature of modern life. The focus of her concern with the emotional potential of modern prose bears the impress of De Quincey’s own impassioned prose. Before Woolf’s writing career began, De Quincey had always been a favourite writer in the family as she describes in *Moments of Being* (MB, 97). “Influence”, Bloom famously argues “is a metaphor, one that implicates a matrix of relationships—imagistic, temporal, spiritual, psychological” (xxiii) that implicitly induces anxiety in later writers. Yet, De Quincey’s legacy in Woolf’s work is explicitly acknowledged. What Woolf inherits from De Quincey is not a feeling of

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<sup>65</sup> Steve Ellis, *Virginia Woolf and the Victorians* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

competition but liberating inspiration. Though much of De Quincey's literary style of thinking seeps into Woolf, she always blends this with her own practices to suit her needs as a modernist novelist. Therefore, though we can see that the reading of De Quincey "forced her to rethink the relationship between the genres" (190) as Freeman points out in *The Lyrical Novel*,<sup>66</sup> there are always intentional swerves that announce her own project.

Bloom argues that writers are often influenced by other writers whose heritage seems distant and unfamiliar because there is an unwillingness to admit any direct influence from those who are too close and a threat to the originality of the legatee. Compared to other more recent predecessors, De Quincey appears more of an admired writer for Woolf than a close rival. In his numerous sketches, impressions, and essay fragments, De Quincey achieves multiple ways of beholding humanity that resonate with Woolf. She acknowledges De Quincey's literary style, but the real challenge for Woolf is how to develop something of her own, something original, and something contemporary to cope with her own modern issues.

In two of her important essays, Woolf as a critic, as well as a pupil and an admirer, investigates De Quincey's literary style in a thorough way and undergoes what Bloom would call a "profound act of reading that is a kind of falling in love with a literary work." (xxiii) Woolf considers De Quincey's "Impassioned Prose", which "work[s] upon our minds as poetry works upon them" (*GR*, 33) and has "made a class for himself" (*GR*, 34) among other prose writers. De Quincey captures splendid moments and casts upon them a poetic nuance with his own artistic style of always searching for answers from his internal world. Woolf recognises the poetic aspects of De Quincey's prose and suggests that is why people read him (*GR*, 32). As a prose

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<sup>66</sup> Ralph Freedman, *The Lyrical Novel: Studies in Hermann Hesse, Andre Gide, and Virginia Woolf* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1963).

writer with “all his poetic sensibility” (*GR*, 34), De Quincey “ventured into those shadowy regions” (*GR*, 40) of human psychology and created between his reader and himself “an intimacy with the mind, and not with the body.” (*GR*, 39) In “Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown”,<sup>67</sup> Woolf is convinced by De Quincey that intimacy is a privileged form of relationship between a writer and his readers and such power is expressed in her own words: “The writer must get into touch with his reader by putting before him something which he recognizes, which therefore stimulates his imagination, and makes him willing to co-operate in the far more difficult business of intimacy.” (*CDB*, 104) In Woolf’s writing of intimacy, it is easy to see De Quincey’s literature of power colouring her own focus on the writer and the technique of fictional writing. Though a broadly similar idea is shared between De Quincey and Woolf, the focus has shifted from theorising literature to Woolf’s engaging mission of bringing literature to the public.

Unlike writers who ignore “the mind which is exposed in solitude” and “its thoughts, its rhapsodies, its dreams” (*GR*, 34), De Quincey establishes his status for Woolf with his “immense power of language” and his precise grasp of human emotions which creates an empathetic echo in the minds of his readers. Verbosity, as one of De Quincey’s stylistic features is, in Woolf’s view, a necessary defect due to the subject nature of writing about the human mind. Capable of conveying characters admirably, De Quincey “wanted time to soliloquize and loiter; here to pick up some trifle and bestow upon it all his powers of analysis and decoration... He wanted a subject that would allow him all possible freedom and yet possess enough emotional warmth to curb his inborn verbosity.” (*GR*, 36-37) Yet, as much as Woolf agrees with De Quincey on the depiction of the human mind, her own literary style eschews

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<sup>67</sup> Virginia Woolf, “Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown” in *The Captain’s Death Bed* (London: The Hogarth Press, 1950), 90. Hereafter cited with abbreviation, *CDB*.

verbosity in order to carve out a space for the poetic and precise use of language.

In part reacting against the Enlightenment preoccupation with reason, Romantic writers turned to personal, emotional, and natural themes and human sentiment becomes the focus of Romantic literature. Not only apparent in poetry, such a turn was always proclaimed to be the focus of the novel as in Sterne and Richardson. Romantic poetics observed in both poetry and novels contributed significantly to elements of De Quincey's psychological prose that focuses on the human mind and it is this element of his writing, in particular, that is adopted by Woolf to revolutionise the art of her fiction. Time distinguishes De Quincey and Woolf, but their aim of establishing their writing with an aesthetic value draws them together. Prose writing is regarded as the genre of gentlemen in the Romantic period; it is the genre of knowledge and philosophical thinking. However, De Quincey introduces into prose the poetic element he observed in Wordsworth and Coleridge and which he engages in writing the literature of power. Woolf, inspired by De Quincey's impassioned prose, also injects Romantic poetics into her novels and proposes a reformation of fiction writing to overthrow the conventions created and set in stone, as she saw them, by her Victorian precursors.

Both De Quincey and Woolf are fascinated with Romantic poetry, yet neither writes poetry. The two take not the forms of poetry, but its spiritual dimension in relation to the individual mind. Seen as fundamental and innate to humans, "Poetry" is defined by Shelley as "the expression of the Imagination" (675). The underlying close relation between imagination and humanity is outlined by Shelley and it is also central to Woolf's novels. With their eyes on imagination, language becomes "arbitrarily produced by the Imagination and has relation to thoughts" (678). Language is a tool and not the essence of poetry. Though entrusted with the power of representation, language is secondary to humanity and the human imagination.

Under the same principle of understanding the role of language, Shelley argues that “the popular division into prose and verse is inadmissible in accurate philosophy.”

(678) Shelley elaborates his idea with the example of Plato:

The distinction between poets and prose-writers is a vulgar error. The distinction between philosophers and poets has been anticipated. Plato was essentially a poet—the truth and splendour of his imagery and the melody of his language is the most intense that it is possible to conceive.  
(679)

Shelley sees Plato as a poet for his insistence on rejecting the measure of forms and seeking to kindle a harmony in thoughts divested of shape and action (679). Shelley’s poetic idea has an undeniably broad sense which exceeds conventions and rigid definition. The elements contributing to poetry are inclusive rather than exclusive: “Language, colour, form, and religious and civil habits of action are all the instruments and the materials of poetry.” (677) Shelley’s generous and all-embracing understanding of poetry makes poetry an encompassing ideological concept. A poem is not the only vehicle of poetry; the poetical genius can shine elsewhere: “The parts of a composition may be poetical, without the composition as a whole being a poem. A single sentence may be considered as a whole though it may be found in the midst of a series of unassimilated portions; a single word even may be a spark of inextinguishable thought.” (680)

In a study of Shelley’s translation of Plato, Michael O’Neill agrees with Shelley’s claim in *A Defence of Poetry* that the distinction between poets and prose-writers is a vulgar one. Shelley has blended both the ideas of Wordsworth and Coleridge, as O’Neill observes that Shelley “picks up Wordsworth’s attempt to erase the difference between poetry and prose”; Wordsworth claims in the Preface to *Lyrical Ballads* that “there neither is, nor can be, any essential difference between the language of prose and metrical composition.” In both Shelley and Wordsworth’s

poetry, language serves as the vehicle of poetic ideas but is not confined by metrical presentation. Language again is the tool of representation not the represented.

O'Neill also suggests Shelley's closeness to Coleridge who says in *Biographia Literaria* that "The writings of Plato... furnish undeniable proofs that poetry of the highest kind may exist without metre, and even without the contradistinguishing objects of a poem." Both of them believe "that great prose attains the condition of poetry."<sup>68</sup> O'Neill's observation brings Shelley and other Romantic poets together in their shared opinion on poetry and prose in regarding language as only a medium for conveying poetry and rejecting therefore any fundamental separation of poem and prose. Shelley suggests that "Every original language near to its source is in itself the chaos of a cyclic poem" (677) because "language itself is poetry" (676). Shelley does not equate language with poetry as much as he is concerned to point out that language is the incarnation of poetic ideas. With language as the agent and representation, Shelley believes that what separates the poem from prose is not the form, but what permeates the work as the ability to "[awaken] and [enlarge] the mind itself by rendering it the receptacle of a thousand unapprehended combinations of thought." (681)

In her diary entry on 22<sup>nd</sup> of June, 1940, Woolf shows her admiration for Shelley in her commitment to using literary criticism to explore her ideas about poetic language: "How delicate and pure and musical and uncorrupted [Shelley] and Coleridge read... How lightly and firmly they put down their feet, and how they sing; and how they compact; and fuse and deepen." (WD, 324) At the same time, Woolf sees poetic language to be the only adequate tool for literary criticism: "I wish I could invent a new critical method—something swifter and lighter and more colloquial and

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<sup>68</sup> Michael O'Neill, "Emulating Plato: Shelley as Translator and Prose Poet" in *The Unfamiliar Shelley*, ed. by Alan M. Weinberg and Timothy Webb (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2009), 251-252.



yet intense: more to the point and less composed; more fluid and following the flight” (WD, 324). De Quincey’s idea of the literature of power is sharpened by Shelley’s speculations on the nature of the poetic.

In Woolf’s essay, “The Narrow Bridge of Art”,<sup>69</sup> Romantic influences are empathetically announced in Woolf’s own modern interpretation. Echoing Shelley’s *A Defence of Poetry*, Woolf stakes her claim for the writing of modern fiction:

[Of] course poetry has always been overwhelmingly on the side of beauty. She has always insisted in certain rights, such as rhyme, metre, poetic diction. She has never been used for the common purpose of life. Prose has taken all the dirty work on to her shoulders; has answered letters, paid bills, written articles, made speeches, served the needs of businessmen, shopkeepers, lawyers, soldiers, peasants. (GR, 17)

Published in 1927 in *New York Herald Tribune*, this essay could be seen as Woolf’s manifesto as a novelist, asserting her initial attempt to put prose writing back onto the literary scene and expound her thoughts upon the further application of poetics in her own time. Poetry had assumed literary precedence since the Elizabethan period, but Woolf argues that while poetry remains a distilled form of writing, poetry is no longer capable of lending her services to modern writers—“The great channel of expression which has carried away so much energy, so much genius, seems to have narrowed itself or to have turned aside.” (GR, 12) Poetry appears to be inadequate to the task when Woolf’s generation is “full of monstrous, hybrid, unmanageable emotions”; in a time of doubt and conflict, “the fine fabric of a lyric is no more fitted to contain this point of view than a rose leaf to envelop the rugged immensity of a rock.” (GR, 12) Similar to the distinction made by Shelley, a story is a bundle of detached facts; yet when in “an age clearly when we are not fast anchored where we are; things are moving around us; we are moving ourselves” (GR, 11), poetry fails to “express this

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<sup>69</sup> Virginia Woolf, “The Narrow Bridge of Art” in *Granite and Rainbow* (London: Hogarth Press, 1981), 11. Hereafter cited with abbreviation, GR.

discord, this incongruity, this sneer, this contrast, this quick, queer” (*GR*, 17) sensation of modern life. While poems are regulated by rhyme, metre, and diction, prose has its freedom from rigidity of language and opens its service to accommodate modern life.

In Woolf’s view, the form of a poem might have stopped it from capturing the pace of modern life, but the poetic remains a source of inspiration. Woolf proposes that modern life should “be written in prose, but in prose which has many of the characteristics of poetry. It will have something of the exaltation of poetry, but much of the ordinariness of prose. It will be dramatic, and yet not a play.” (*GR*, 18)

Novelists like Woolf “long for some more impersonal relationship... long for ideas, for dreams, for imaginations, for poetry” (*GR*, 19) and will be like poets who are “always able to transcend... to give us his questioning not of his own personal lot alone but of the state and being of all human life.” (*GR*, 19) Very shortly before the publication of this essay Woolf published *To the Lighthouse* and was writing *Orlando* at the same time. She describes *To the Lighthouse* as a “poetic experimental book” (*WD*, 104) in her diary and *Orlando* as a break from her poetic experiments. In *To the Lighthouse*, refined language and an ideological quest are blended with modern complexity of psychology. With “the democratic art of prose; its freedom, its fearlessness, its flexibility” (*GR*, 20), Woolf makes *To the Lighthouse* a good example of the kind of attributes she thinks that modern fiction might take on from the heritage of poetry: “It will give the relations of man to nature, to fate; his imagination; his dreams. But it will also give the sneer, the contrast, the question, the closeness and complexity of life” (*GR*, 19). Though *Orlando* might not be written in the same way as *To the Lighthouse* (with its condensed language, refined plot, and carefully designed three-part form), *Orlando* still carries many references to poetry and to the close relationship between English literature and the growth of poetry through the symbol of the Elizabethan oak tree.

Speaking of poetry, Shelley suggests that capitalised Poetry has its universality rooted in “all other forms of order and of beauty according to which the materials of human life are susceptible of being arranged” (Shelley, 700) and therefore poetry as an ideology “marries exultation and horror, grief and pleasure, eternity and change; it subdues to union under its light yoke all irreconcilable things.” (Shelley, 698) Like De Quincey’s literature of power, Shelley believes a higher dominating power of Poetic ideal harmonises life; this generosity and sympathetic principle of literature is adopted by Woolf for her modern subject matter. While Woolf does not want the rigid form of poetry, the broad sense of poetry fertilises her art of fiction and enables her to envision how novels would be written in the future:

It will make little use of the marvellous fact-recording power, which is one of the attributes of fiction. It will tell us very little about the house, incomes, occupations of its characters; it will have little kinship with the sociological novel or the novel of environment. With these limitations it will express the feeling and ideas of the characters closely and vividly, but from a different angle. It will resemble poetry in this that it will give not only or mainly people’s relations to each other and their activities together, as the novel has hitherto done, but it will give the relation of the mind to general ideas and its soliloquy in solitude. (*GR*, 19)

From the quotation above, it is apparent that Woolf strives to blend the merits of poetry with the writing of fiction in order to revolt against Edwardian Realism, which she believes misses the truth about life. In her vision, fiction should be a picture with a poetic frame of its universality and a prosaic elaboration of the idiosyncratic individual. Crossing “the narrow bridge of art”, there might be outdated conventions that she would prefer to be rid of, yet there are traits of Romanticism that Woolf would want to carry forward into her own art of fiction.

## Modernity and the End of Realism

First published in 1873, Walter Pater sees in *The Renaissance: Studies in Art and Poetry*, the experience of modern life embodied in a series of perpetual motions and conceives of these external experiences as having a much stronger influence on our internal world.<sup>70</sup> Woolf holds the same view and regards modern life as a series of ceaseless bombardments—a constant assault upon our emotional perception. Life confronts us from every direction, and with her sensibility, Woolf says, “the novelist never forgets and is seldom distracted... He can no more cease to receive impressions than a fish in mid-ocean can cease to let the water rush through his gills.”<sup>71</sup> Life is not solid and concrete, nor is it stable or rigid. Life is broken down into sparkling fragments—“From all sides they come, an incessant shower of innumerable atoms... Is it not the task of the novelist to convey this varying, this unknown and uncircumscribed spirit, whatever aberration or complexity it may display, with as little mixture of the alien and external as possible?”<sup>72</sup> Woolf’s own perception of modern life determines what she thinks modern fiction should be capable of doing.

In “Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown”, Woolf claims: “In or about December 1910 human character changed” (*CBD*, 91); Woolf sees the year as the watershed of literary history that marks the end of the Edwardian generation and the beginning of her own. To differentiate herself from Realistic writers, Woolf partakes in literary experiments concerning the idea of self, character, sensations, as well as how these elements interact with modern life. Understanding the inescapable significance of modern society, Woolf registers new cognitive perceptions of living in a modern world, a world in which one is constantly assaulted by various sensations. Individuals are not

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<sup>70</sup> Walter Pater, *The Renaissance* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 150.

<sup>71</sup> Virginia Woolf, “Life and the Novelist” in *Granite and Rainbow* (London: Hogarth Press, 1981), 41. Hereafter cited with abbreviation, *GR*.

<sup>72</sup> Virginia Woolf, “Modern Fiction” in *The Crowded Dance of Modern Life* (London: Penguin, 1993), 8.

isolated organs of sentimentality; instead, Woolf treats modern subjects who are constantly responding to the external world. Novels should therefore be capable of representing the interaction between the society and the individual. With her phenomenological stance, the representation of the outer world is a mirror-reflection of the subjective workings of the individual mind shaped by, but in turn shaping, its environment. Woolf's strategy of telling the story of modern life is through concentrating on selective moments. She writes in the dairy that:

I mean to eliminate all waste, deadness, superfluity: to give the moment whole; whatever it includes. Say that the moment is a combination of thought; sensation; the voice of the sea. Waste, deadness, come from the inclusion of things that don't belong to the moment; this appalling narrative business of the realist: getting on from lunch to dinner: it is false, unreal, merely conventional. Why admit anything to literature that is not poetry—by which I mean saturated? Is that not my grudge against novelists? that they select nothing? The poets succeeding by simplifying: practically everything is left out. I want to put practically everything in: yet to saturate. (WD, 136)

Edwardian novels fail to appeal to human feeling, leaving their representations of life partial and confined. With a contrary stance, Woolf shows her readiness to acknowledge Water Pater's sensibility and aesthetics and to be immersed in his outlook on life. In *The Renaissance*, Pater observes that in modern life individuals experience nothing but "an interval, and then our place knows us no more" and "our one chance lies in expanding that interval, in getting as many pulsations as possible into the given time." (153) Pater's observation expresses a sense of insecurity in modern life; when everything happens and vanishes swiftly, the identity of selfhood is at stake in the fast swirl of life. Individuals could only try to maintain a sense of self by getting hold of meaningful moments through artistic creation. Thus, Judith Ryan observes in *The Vanishing Subject* that the modern subject in the Paterian moment is

“made up of nothing more than the impressions it receives”<sup>73</sup> and becomes unstable and liable to dissolution; it is through “turning the mental construction of self into a consciously creative act” that the subject can be preserved. Woolf would agree with Ryan’s conclusion: “a triumph of vision that both paved the way for art and was itself a kind of art” (28) in her own devotion of responding to existential moments within her own artistry.

As a response to Arnold Bennett’s criticism of *Jacob’s Room*, Woolf points out the failures of Bennett and his Edwardian practice of novel writing in “Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown” with the certain influence of Paterian understanding of Modernity. Woolf argues that the very nature of life does not stay the same, nor should the writing of it—“All human relations have shifted—those between masters and servants, husbands and wives, parents and children. And when human relations change there is at the same time a change in religion, conduct, politics, and literature.” (*CBD*, 9271) It is this essential change in society that Woolf requires a concomitant change in literature in order to accommodate modern life. She voices her opinion on Edwardian novels proposing the necessity for change because the new century requires a move beyond the confines of Realism. The breakdown of traditional hierarchy and class segregation should not only happen in social relations but in literature as well.

To speak about modern fiction, Woolf is faced firstly with the task of grasping her characters and this is exactly where she thinks novels should evolve from Victorian conventions. “Think how little we know about character—think how little we know about art” (*CBD*, 91), Woolf says about Edwardian novels. If “catching Mrs. Brown”, the phrase she used to summarise the novelists’ task, is the first thing a novel should achieve, Woolf is left in a state of discontent because Edwardian novels fail to

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<sup>73</sup> Judith Ryan, *The Vanishing Subject: Early Psychology and Literary Modernism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press), 28.

“recognise that the creative process must be open, rather than closed.”<sup>74</sup> Mr. Bennett provided every material supplement that could be known of Mrs. Brown but apprehended nothing of her quintessential being. The delicate balance between society and every individual is ruined by the neglect of subjectivity. When Edwardians regard Mrs. Brown as only a part in the big societal machine, Woolf looks at the machine from every contributing part.

Woolf employs the Romantic idea that a novel should be an organic entity in itself to achieve an independent artistic value; she is also preoccupied by disappointment with the Edwardian neglect of characters. The representation of the impression of Mrs. Brown is what Woolf believes to be the kernel of a novel, but “the Edwardians were never interested in character in itself; or in the book in itself. They were interested in something outside.” (*CBD*, 99-100) Modern society, for Woolf, encapsulates the moment in which individuality is what marks the differences between one human being and another, and thus instead of skating across the surface and externalities, the novel should start with depicting individuals with their idiosyncrasies. Arguing the importance of humanity and its residence in human characters, Woolf criticises Edwardian novels for misplacing enormous emphasis “upon the fabric of things” (*CBD*, 106) but neglecting the character of Mrs. Brown and the prototype of human nature. It is her task as a novelist to penetrate inside Mrs. Brown and create space in her novels to accommodate the “unlimited capacity and infinite variety” (*CBD*, 111) of Mrs. Brown which is denied in Edwardian novels. Mrs. Brown is eternal, but the Edwardian novelists never look at her, never at life, never at human nature (*CBD*, 103). Bennett and his contemporary writers are laborious in describing details, producing three volume pieces which, ironically, fail to let their characters speak. Woolf forcefully concludes that “One line of insight would have

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<sup>74</sup> Julia Briggs, *Reading Virginia Woolf* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2006), 76.

done more than all those lines of description” (*CBD*, 102) to mark out the different approach she sought to initiate within her own writing.

The Edwardian preoccupation with superficial details and the practical matters of life—“the fabric of things” (*CBD*, 106)— Woolf suggests, kills our imaginative power and leaves us with only hard scientific knowledge but very little emotional attunement:

We have been letting ourselves bask in appearance. All this representation of the movement of life has sapped our imaginative power. We have sat receptive and watched, with our eyes rather than with our minds, as we do at the cinema, what passes on the screen in front of us. When we want to use what we have learnt about one of the characters to urge them through some crisis we realize that we have no steam up; no energy at our disposal. How they dressed, what they ate, the slang they used—we know all that; but not what they are. (*GR*, 44)

While poetry has its universal outlook, Edwardian novels limit the possibility of the characters and fail to appeal to a higher common nature of human beings. The novel which devotes itself to the description of Mrs. Brown should insist that “she is an old lady of unlimited capacity and infinite variety, capable of appearing in any place...for she is, of course, the spirit we live by, life itself.” (*CBD*, 111) If life, as embedded in a common character like Mrs. Brown, is to be granted unlimited forms and shapes to cope with its existence transcending time and space, then novels need to capture what modern life means for individuals. Woolf argues, for a novel to survive, lifeless representation is not enough; instead, “each sentence must have, at its heart, a little spark of fire, and this, whatever the risk, the novelist must pluck with his own hands from the blaze.” (*GR*, 47) Woolf expects the novel to be an organic entity in itself—complete and self-contained like *Tristram Shandy* and *Pride and Prejudice* (*CBD*, 99). It is the modern novelists’ task to “sit and watch life and make his book out of the very foam and effervescence of his emotions; or he can put his glass down,



retire to his room and subject his trophy to those mysterious process by which life becomes, like the Chinese coat, able to stand by itself—a sort of impersonal miracle.” (GR, 46) It is this impersonality, but at the same time, universality that Woolf thinks modern novels should convey.

If what De Quincey and other Romantics did in their own time is to rethink the logical forms of Neo-classical literature, Woolf has her eyes on how to bring literature from the banal depiction of Realism to a modern realisation of sensibilities. Adhering to the ideological doctrine of making new statements and experiments, Woolf is proactive in creating her own narrative of modernist fiction. Her criticism of Edwardian novels also involves a rejection of their prudent concept of life. For Woolf, life was “not only the concrete, the visible, the audible and the credible; it was the inner and the outer, the objective and the subjective, the conscious and the unconscious, fact and vision, experience and what lay beyond experience.”<sup>75</sup> The concept of life is a much broader one yet with its anchoring focus on the human sensibility. Woolf wants fiction to convey both “granite and rainbow”—the stable facts and the transient subjective impression of modern life.

Woolf suggests that the narrow definition of life is what hinders fiction from achieving proper status among literary genres. At the same time, Woolf points out that the triviality of the topics associated with fiction gives a false impression of the insignificance of fiction writing. Depicting life seems to become the original sin of fiction:

...fiction is treated as a parasite which draws its substance from life, and must, in gratitude, resemble life or perish. In poetry, in drama, words may excite and stimulate and deepen without this allegiance; but in fiction

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<sup>75</sup> Rita Terezinha Schmidt, “Virginia Woolf’s Criticism: Towards Theoretical Assumption on the Art of Fiction”, *Ilha Do Desterro*, Vol. 24 (1990), 95.

<http://www.ilhadodesterro.ufsc.br/pdf/24%20A/rita%2024%20A.PDF>

they must, first and foremost, hold themselves at the service of the teapot and the pug dog...<sup>76</sup>

Fiction is tied down to the writing of tea parties in an unbalanced way. The task assigned to fiction is limited, the expectation of its language is stereotyped; in Woolf's view, fiction is stopped from having a great empathetic effect on its readers, but instead becomes the equivalent of a domestic straitjacket, a rigid frame of private life. The freedom and democracy Woolf sees in prose writing has been damaged by the conventional use of a domesticated Realism. If fiction is to represent life, it is important to understand that uncertainty and ambiguity are part of life because life is full of doubts, confusions, and moments that are difficult to pin down.

"Life is not a series of gig lamps, symmetrically arranged; life is a luminous halo, a semi-transparent envelope surrounding us from the beginning of consciousness to the end" (Woolf 1993, 8), Woolf defines life in "Modern Fiction". There is a radical shift from a linear and realistic understanding of life to a more subjective and impressionist way of experiencing life. Therefore, an ordered and chronological structuring of events is challenged and replaced by Woolf's more personal, fragmentary and intimate narrative. If everyday life itself encounters sweeping changes at Woolf's time, there is thus a new demand on the techniques of writing novels. In "Modern Fiction", Woolf writes: "Look within and life, it seems, is very far from being 'like this'. Examine for a moment an ordinary mind on an ordinary day. The mind receives a myriad of impressions—trivial, fantastic, evanescent, or engraved with the sharpness of steel." (Woolf 1993, 8) While looking at what is happening in the external world, Woolf also trained her eyes to look introspectively on the mind, as the site of random and unexpected fragments of experience. The mind obtains its significant status for Woolf because the mind is not only a receptor but a

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<sup>76</sup> Virginia Woolf, "The Art of Fiction" in *A Woman's Essays* (London: Penguin, 1992), 124.

projector between the intricate relation between the outer world and the inner mind. In the fast moving modern world with high speed mobility and turbulences of all sorts, life itself is a much more complex and condensed combination of floating events. Before the very complexity of life can be comprehended rationally so much of modern life has already worked on the human mind. A teacup is obviously not big enough to accommodate life.

### For and Against Psychology

Woolf's focus on the mind echoes De Quincey's fascination with the inner realm of humanity; both of them respond to the development of modern psychology. De Quincey is immersed within the Romantic ideal of subjectivity and imagination, as well as his opium inducing mental activities; Woolf, on the other hand, has a close connection with psychological discourse at the turn of the century. Judith Ryan examines the intertextual relations between modernist writings and early empiricist psychology. Ryan acknowledges Pater's empirical view of subjectivity, which sees the subject as threatened with dissolution in the swirl of constant encounters with sensations in Woolf's writings and concludes that "for these writers the self is no more than a bundle of sensory impressions precariously grouped together and constantly threatened with possible dissolution." (Ryan, 4) From the viewpoint of a novelist, "who is slave to life and concocts his books out of the froth of the moments" (*GR*, 47), Woolf agrees with Pater that artistic creation must find a way to hold onto the fleeting moments of human emotions in order to secure the sense of self from dismantling. To keep at bay the unravelling of the self indicates an attempt to make what is transient into something permanent. Literary creation is the artistic means to fulfil this attempt; working on how to devise her tools for representing modern life, Woolf does not "so

much attack or oppose empiricism as develop mechanisms for making it functional and productive.” (Ryan, 228) Woolf’s literary manoeuvre tries to respond to the modern development of psychology by depicting a picture of both the external and the internal.

The cultural shift from a materialist outlook of life to the internal psychological view reminds us of the priority of mind in De Quincey’s writings; this major change takes effect on modern literature. In “An Essay in Aesthetics”, Fry points out: “The whole of animal life, and a great part of human life, is made up of these instinctive reactions to sensible objects, and their accompanying emotions.” (Fry, 17) As quoted earlier, while science has turned its focus to human nature and the intuitive needs of mankind, adequate change in art is also found to strike a balance between the ongoing external world and the opening of the responsive inner life. Responding with her novels, Woolf realizes in “Modern Fiction” that novels would fail if they were concerned only with the body and not the spirit (Woolf 1993, 6); her announcement makes her stance clear: “For the moderns... the point of interest, lies very likely in the dark places of psychology.” (Woolf 1993, 10) The focus on the human mind to be found in De Quincey reaches its fullest expression in the late nineteenth century, when both creative art and scientific medicine undergo a “turn inward” to express a

...psychologization of their methods, subjects, and intention....Both the arts and sciences studied the unconscious, subconscious, and subliminal level of mental life...., and both fields were responsive to the subjectivity of individual consciousness and its relations to the external world...., and both pioneered new techniques of narration to capture the inner workings of the human mind and the moment-by-moment experience of individual consciousness.<sup>77</sup>

The depiction of the human mind becomes the meeting-point of literature and science, an idea which persists today. From a literary point of view, the human mind is not an

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<sup>77</sup> Mark S. Micale ed., *The Modernist Mind: Medicine, Psychology, and the Cultural Arts in Europe and America, 1880-1940* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2004), 2.

uncommon subject; however, it is not until the nineteenth century that science tried to establish its formal and physiological study. Understanding what literature has to offer that is different or absent from a scientific discourse (as it is different from painting and the visual arts) becomes crucial for Woolf in shaping her theory of fiction.

As a member of the Bloomsbury group, Woolf was familiar with the thriving disciplines of psychology, psychiatry and psychoanalysis shaping ideas about the human mind all around her. Her own Hogarth Press published the works of Sigmund Freud, translated by her close friends, James and Alix Strachey in 1925. Melanie Klein was also invited to give a talk in Bloomsbury, arranged by the Stracheys and hosted by Woolf's brother and sister-in-law, Adrian and Karin Stephen.<sup>78</sup> The close relation between the avant-garde Bloomsbury group and psychoanalytic discourse created an informed scientific environment for the knowledge and practice of modern psychology. Inevitably, her literary investigation of human psychology resonates with the themes and concepts of psychoanalysis, just as she broadly develops William James's generalised idea of the stream of thoughts in her style of writing; she was also surrounded by other members of both Freudian and Kleinian schools of psychoanalysis.<sup>79</sup>

Though very close to the ongoing psychoanalytic discourses at the time, Woolf implicitly keeps a distance from them. Surrounded by the scientific discourse of psychology, the new experimentalism of James and others, Woolf appears to be very aware of its defect—rigid categorisation. When psychoanalysts aim to generalise and categorise their cases so as to produce normative understandings of the human mind, Woolf equates this to the novelist writing in the mode of Edwardian Realism. Woolf

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<sup>78</sup> Biographical evidences are provided in Hermione Lee's *Virginia Woolf* (London: Vintage 1997), 372; 472.

<sup>79</sup> Under Woolf's own Hogarth Press, Freud's work, translated by James Strachey, was first introduced to British society; with Adrian Stephen's arrangement, Woolf also met Klein in a lecture in 1926. Bloomsbury was the pioneer in bringing psychoanalysis in to the UK.

aims to expand and discover the complexity of individual human situations, emotions, and personalities. Science narrows every individual to a single stereotype, but Woolf suggests literature should expand idiosyncratic examples to arouse the empathy of everyone. Her criticism of scientific generalisation is apparent in “Freudian Fiction” and points out psychoanalysis “resembles science in comparison to fiction...casts fiction as a victim, rather than an attribute, of psychoanalytic discourse.”<sup>80</sup> Woolf condenses her criticisms of Freudian approaches in her review of J. D. Beresford’s *An Imperfect Mother* and her main concern is that in Beresford’s utilisation, psychoanalysis is created as a “patent key that opens every door”.<sup>81</sup> The problem with this master key of psychoanalysis is that “It simplifies rather than complicates, detracts rather than enriches”; by “[stinting] his people of flesh and blood”, the characters in Beresford’s novel “have ceased to be individuals” and become scientific cases. (Woolf 1992, 23)

In the case of Beresford, Woolf criticises the key of psychoanalysis that opens the door that leads to, and only to, the Oedipal Complex. While the story might prove the theory of psychoanalysis, psychoanalysis does not serve to illuminate the merits of literature in return. Instead, psychoanalysis narrows the possibility of interpreting the story. The criticism of Beresford’s novel reveals Woolf’s rejection of a scientific simplification and pathologisation of her characters based on the imposing framework of psychoanalysis. Between science and literature, Woolf obviously does not welcome the short cut opened by the master key of psychoanalysis. As a creative writer, she is more preoccupied with how to discover the true intricacies and nuances of the human mind hidden in the idiosyncrasies outside the grasp of science and the rigidity of its methods and forms that are unresponsive to the demands of the contingent and to the

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<sup>80</sup> Elizabeth Abel, *Virginia Woolf and the Fictions of Psychoanalysis* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 17.

<sup>81</sup> Virginia Woolf, “Freudian Fiction” in *A Woman’s Essays* (London: Penguin, 1992), 23.

complex process of the self as a process of self-interpretation embedded in history.

As much as Woolf is aware of the defects in the psychoanalytic approach, the dialogue between art and science might still play a positive role. Micale reminds us that “the art-science relation [is] mutually originaive and reciprocally enriching.”(3) The reason for this, Micale points out, is that both psychiatric discourses and literature are involved in finding new forms and genres for expression; both partake of a movement “associated with the rejection of traditional linguistic and aesthetic practices and experimentation with new artistic forms to achieve heightened expressivity.” (6) Psychoanalysts like Freud “drew examples, ideas and terms—catharsis, cathexis, the Oedipal complex, narcissism—from Shakespeare.” (5) Woolf, in her novels, also incorporates many of the psychological concepts. De Quincey’s general focus on the human mind is developed in more detail. In *Mrs. Dalloway*, Woolf explores the style of “stream of consciousness”, a term first used by American psychologist William James in *The Principle of Psychology* in 1890 to depict the consecutive flow of thoughts in human consciousness. The way Woolf employed “stream-of-consciousness” is not a direct application of scientific terms and concepts; she modified it and expands an individual’s train of thought into multiple lines of consciousness. In doing so, Woolf successfully blends science with the voices of her own in keeping with her interest as a novelist to depict the intersubjective communication of the minds or the failure of it.

William James was the first to try to articulate fully the human consciousness as a moving stream, instead of segregated and disjointed pieces. He used the term to describe the unending opening of human thoughts, emotions, feelings, imaginations which form the human consciousness. Woolf elaborates the concept of a “stream of consciousness” and enters in and out of the minds of her characters to express their inner feelings and thoughts. By moving freely between past memories and present

scenes within the single passage of a day, Woolf's narrative overlooks the traditional chronological sense of time and focuses on the mental perception of the characters as the mind drifts. Psychoanalysis is Woolf's ambiguous rival, as its tendency to generalise may have a reductionist effect on the complexity of literature; Woolf adopts a medical technique of the talking cure and allows the protagonists in her novel to think aloud though often voiced through an invisible narrative presence. In *To the Lighthouse*, Woolf applies a psychological emphasis to create a narrative that follows the progression of the mental processes of the character. She switches the narrative focus between Mrs. Ramsay and the guests at the dining table, for example, providing a silent conversation mediated through free indirect discourse between the characters in a multi-perspectival rendition of intersubjectivities. She is not content with only writing the inner voices of Mrs. Ramsay; but instead moves her narrative focus amongst all the guests. Against the lit candles on the table, "the faces on both sides of the table were brought nearer" (*TTL*, 79); Woolf creates a literary room that allows for a panoramic picture constructed out of the participation and perspective of every individual present.

### Woolf's Artistic Manoeuvres

Woolf's rejection of Edwardian Realism and her pronounced focus on the internal world makes it very tempting to conclude that Woolf is solely devoted to representing the inner psychology of modern life. Yet, Woolf's consideration of the mind is always related to external events. The minds in Woolf's novels are not reclusive or necessarily introverted. Her emphasis is not simply on introspection and she rarely uses straight interior monologue. Woolf is just as much interested in the mind's relation to other minds—the intersubjectivity as presented in the weaving and



involvements of many inner thoughts and feelings. The dinner table scene in *To the Lighthouse* is an attempt to illustrate the intersubjective communication among the minds of everyone. Lily Briscoe, like everyone else at the dining table, is involved in the conversation as well as submerged in her own speculations and the projections onto her of others. Language is the cover for a more covert conversation that is going on amongst the characters gathered. Sitting opposite each other, Lily Briscoe and Charles Tansley cannot stop changing and guessing the unspoken messages in each other's gestures. Lily thought "Everything about him had that meagre fixity, the bare unloveliness." (*TTL*, 70) Tansley receives Lily's feelings towards him: "He had no others. He felt very rough and isolated and lonely. He knew that she was trying to tease him for some reason" (*TTL*, 71). Meanwhile, Tansley was irritated because he worries what Mrs. Ramsay would feel hearing his rejection of Lily Briscoe's proposition of going to the lighthouse: "He wished he could think of something to say to Mrs. Ramsay, something which would show her that he was not just a dry prig." (*TTL*, 71) His hope was abandoned since Mrs. Ramsay had turned her attention to others. The intention and perhaps manipulation of playing with human psychology is presented in Woolf's juxtaposition of different interior feelings. Her depiction is not a single person's monologue; it is an otherwise unheard conversation in human relationship. Woolf, like Lily Briscoe, "knew all that" (*TTL*, 74). Woolf describes this intersubjective knowledge as penetrating: "Sitting opposite [Tansley] could she not see, as in an X-ray photograph, the ribs and thigh bones of the young man's desire to impress himself" (*TTL*, 74).

The understanding of the substratum of this internal language becomes a prominent aspect in Woolf's writing; the flow of the feelings, emotions and thoughts is woven smoothly into the cross-table conversation. The table scene represents the ambiguous and the incongruous in human relationships:

Lily was listening; Mrs. Ramsay was listening; they were all listening. But already bored, Lily felt that something was lacking; Mr. Bankes felt that something was lacking. Pulling her shawl round her, Mrs. Ramsay felt that something was lacking. All of them bending themselves to listen thought, 'Pray heaven that the inside of my mind may not be exposed,' for each thought, 'The others are feeling this. They are outraged and indignant with the government about the fishermen. Whereas, I feel nothing at all.' (*TTL*, 77)

The collage of events and happenings fulfils the complexity of a dining scene and successfully traces a spider web-like picture of intermingling from serving the soup, lighting the candles, to the rendition of the psychological interpretation and projection of her characters. Characters all feel there is a missing piece, while withholding a piece of the puzzle themselves. Woolf's intersubjective narrative completes the picture as much as a novelist might. Woolf's achievement as a writer is not that much different from that of Mrs. Ramsay, who feels "They all sat separate. And the whole of the effort of merging and flowing and creating rested on her." (*TTL*, 69) Mrs. Ramsay's effort in making the dinner a successful one is paid off when she finally connects to her guests emotionally by observing them rather than listening to them. She feels of Tansley: "she could tell by the sound of his voice, and his emphasis and his uneasiness...Now she need not listen." (*TTL*, 86) In this moment of emotional revelation, Mrs Ramsay's

eyes were so clear that they seemed to go round the table unveiling each of these people, and their thoughts and their feelings, without effort like a light stealing under water so that its ripples and the reeds in it and the minnows balancing themselves, and the sudden silent trout are all lit up hanging, trembling. (*TTL*, 86-87)

It is Mrs. Ramsay's vision to see through the superficial communication that bridges her own perceptions and those of her guests. At this particular moment that she preserved, "she said nothing" (*TTL*, 87) and she recognises nothing need be said.

To express the vision that Mrs. Ramsay possesses, Woolf manoeuvres her way

round the characters on the dining table, threading them together like individual beads. The unnoticed interaction and exchange of feelings, emotions and thoughts of each character should be included to make the picture whole. Woolf's means of completing and demonstrating the picture is through art. At the dining table, the bouncing and reflecting of human relations constantly reminds Lily Briscoe of her painting; her painting is her way of enunciation. Moving the salt cellar to a flower pattern on the table cloth to remind herself, Lily Briscoe felt that: "In a flash she saw her picture, and thought, Yes, I shall put the tree further in the middle; then I shall avoid that awkward space. That's what I'll do. That's what has been puzzling me." (*TTL*, 70)

A preoccupying entanglement in Lily Briscoe's relations with others is her relation with Mrs. Ramsay. Replete with complex biographical allusions and implications, Mrs. Ramsay is the mother figure providing direction as well as the mentor of art, whose vision penetrates life. Much of the later criticism of the novel approached Lily Briscoe's purple triangle from a post-impressionist point of view, which bears the influence of Roger Fry and his reflections on the painter Paul Cézanne. Indeed, the influence of a post-impressionist aesthetic is noticeable throughout. When Mr. Bankes inquires of the meaning behind the purple triangle, Lily Briscoe answers that: "She knew his objection—that no one could tell it for a human shape. But she had made no attempt at likeness." (*TTL*, 45) The likeness in shape is replaced by the resonance of emotions. In *Vision and Design*, Fry's idea of art is that:

The post-impressionists explored the notion that it was the function of art not to imitate but to find equivalents; thus vision and design worked inextricably together, and one chief aspect of order in a work of art is unity... in a picture this unity is due to a balancing of the attractions of the eye about the central line of the picture.<sup>82</sup>

However, writing from Woolf's novelist point of view, the design of Lily Briscoe's

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<sup>82</sup> Sue Roe and Susan Sellers, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Virginia Woolf* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 168.

painting, instead of being purely artistic and abstract, is artistically symbolic. The repeated reiteration of the purple triangle in Lily's process of painting translates as the triangular relation among Mrs. Ramsay, James and Lily Briscoe as well as symbolises Mrs. Ramsay's picture of herself—"a wedge-shaped core of darkness." (*TTL*, 52)

In the wedge-shaped core of darkness, Mrs. Ramsay experiences the pure existence of herself, an artistic revelation of herself: "When life sank down for a moment, the range of experience seemed limitless... The core of darkness could go anywhere, for no one saw it... There was freedom, there was peace, there was, most welcome of all, a summoning together, a resting on a platform of stability." (*TTL*, 53) Life came together to Mrs. Ramsay "in this peace, this rest, this eternity" (*TTL*, 75). Mrs. Ramsay's sensibility and her visions in life equip her with an artist's intuition. Lily Briscoe has been observing Mrs. Ramsay from the point of view of a painter, but how to translate Mrs. Ramsay into her work of art is a long journey with a difficult start. Her painting is a painting of Mrs. Ramsay, but at the same time, it is more a painting of Lily's relationship with Mrs. Ramsay: "It was in that moment's flight between the picture and her canvas that the demons set on her who often brought her to the verge of tears and made this passage from conception to work as dreadful as any down a dark passage for a child." (*TTL*, 19)

The "dark passage" from conception to work is not only dreadful for Lily, but for other modernist novelists as well. In "Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown", Woolf asserts that the moderns hardly benefit from their Edwardian forefathers and this tradition is of little use for a modernist narrative; she complains that "those tools are not our tools, and that business is not our business. For us those conventions are ruin, those tools are death." (*CDB*, 104) Modernist novels "do not cease to be interested in character when they have learnt enough about it for practical purposes." (*CDB*, 92) Modern novels dig through the surface and are eager for "the core of darkness" in their characters:

They go a step further, they feel that there is something permanently interesting in character in itself. When all the practical business of life has been discharged, there is something about people which continues to seem to them of overwhelming importance, in spite of the fact that it has no bearing whatever upon their happiness, comfort, or income. (*CDB*, 92-93)

The passage to the representation of art has to be led by a different light, and this is when Woolf follows and captures the inner voice of her characters. Lily wants to know the mind as the inside world of Mrs. Ramsay, where, leaning against her, Lily imagines “in the chambers of the mind and heart of the woman who was, physically, touching her, were stood, like the treasures in the tombs of kings, tablets bearing sacred inscriptions, which if one could spell them out would teach one everything” (*TTL*, 44). The existence of Mrs. Ramsay to Lily is the same as that of the lighthouse to the characters; standing far beyond reach in the midst of wind and clouds, all one can see is the light irradiating from its invisible stark tower. It is the radiance and colour of the lighthouse, but it is not the lighthouse itself. It is yet to be effable. Even though Lily was leaning against Mrs. Ramsay, the intimacy has not yet been achieved. The medium of communication is missing in the relationship. “Nothing happened. Nothing! Nothing!” and although like a bee, “drawn by some sweetness or sharpness in the air intangible to touch or taste” (*TTL*, 44), Lily has not yet found the way to describe the inner feeling she has towards Mrs. Ramsay and the painting is left unfinished.

The death of Mrs. Ramsay leaves an empty step where she used to sit. The empty step and the unfinished painting give Lily an interesting artistic freedom. Resuming her painting after ten years, Lily’s revelation as an artist is that “The great revelation had never come. The great revelation perhaps never did come.” (*TTL*, 133) The image of Mrs. Ramsay reminds Lily that “there were little daily miracles, illuminations, matches struck unexpectedly in the dark” and these are why Mrs.

Ramsay said “Life stands still here” (*TTL*, 133). Lily is able to see the extraordinary in the ordinary and understands how Mrs. Ramsay made moments permanent. “In the midst of chaos there was shape; this external passing and flowing was stuck into stability. Life stands still here” and this is “the nature of a revelation.” (*TTL*, 133) In a moment when Lily “lost consciousness of outer things, and her name and her personality and her appearance” (*TTL*, 132), Lily’s mind “kept throwing up from its depth, scenes, and names, and sayings, and memories and ideas, like a fountain spurting over that glaring, hideously difficult white space” (*TTL*, 132) that Lily is able to attune her feeling to the real Mrs. Ramsay.

### Women and Fiction

Lily’s journey of accomplishing her painting is thwarted by not just an emotional barrier between herself and Mrs. Ramsay, but more so by constant judgements and doubts thrown upon her by her male companions. Why, Lily asks herself, “did she mind what he said?” and what does that mean when men criticised “Women can’t write, women can’t paint” (*TTL*, 71). The doubts and criticism coming from men, if not a hindrance, are a discouragement and inevitably bring the discussion of gender into the consideration of art. An important aspect in discussing Woolf’s novel is how gender and femininity affect modern fiction. What Woolf sees in modern fiction is the lack of a proper name, which is exactly the same hindrance in the women’s movement. Laura Marcus suggests that, as a female writer in the intersection of new social and cultural thinking, “Woolf drew very close links between the future of women and the future of fiction.”<sup>83</sup> In Woolf’s own words, people should care more about “the future of fiction, the death of poetry or the development by the average woman of a prose

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<sup>83</sup> Laura Marcus, *Virginia Woolf* (London: Northcote House, 2004), 52.

style completely expressive of her mind.” (*AROO*, 124) At the same time, she points out the lack of female history:

...that they had no tradition behind them, or one so short and partial that it was of little help. For we think back through our mothers if we are women. It is useless to go to the great men writers for help, however much one may go to them for pleasure.... The weight, the pace, the stride of a man’s mind are too unlike her own for her to lift anything substantial from him successfully. (*AROO*, 99)

In both *A Room of One’s Own* and “Women and Fiction” Woolf makes a connection between the condition of women and that of modern fiction. Women at the time are just as helpless and face the same predicaments as modernist writers; as Woolf complains before: “those tools are not our tools, and that business is not our business. For us those conventions are ruin, those tools are death.” (*CDB*, 104) Frustrated as Woolf might be, it is a great opportunity to break up patriarchal dominance and establish the art of modern fiction as well a narrative that belongs to, and serves the pleasure of, women.

The new social and political changes around gender relations inevitably permeated Woolf’s writing. Woolf asserts “1910 had begun with a new year’s resolution to contribute more actively to the Women’s Movement” (*AROO*, 131), and she joined the Society for Adult Suffrage the same year. However, political methods were not enough for Woolf. Woolf’s pacifism is more pronounced than her commitment to political activism, so it is perhaps not surprising that she could not support “the violent and militaristic tactics” nor surprising that she expressed her opposition to “ideological rigidity” which single-mindedly believes that “political power would bring an end to all other types of oppression of women.”<sup>84</sup> Such tactics and political strategy failed to convince Woolf that they might offer the solutions to the problems women were going through. Woolf wishes for a balanced and insightful

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<sup>84</sup> Anna Snaith, *Virginia Woolf: Public and Private Negotiations* (London: Palgrave, 2000), 30.

approach and makes “a distinction between the narrowly political focus the Suffragette agitation had created and the wide range of issues the movement had raised from its beginnings.”<sup>85</sup> Woolf’s scepticism about the suffrage movement is obvious:

What had begun as a comprehensive movement of thought about women’s nature and status—legal, educational, psychological, economic, professional, marital, and political—had been turned into a much narrower cause deliberately centered on a single issue: the vote.  
(Zwerdling, 214)

The single-minded promise of the suffrage movement is based on the rationale that “political power would guarantee every other desirable reform” (214). What the suffragette movement proposed was a revolution against the external environment. While Woolf might sympathise with their ideas, her approach is different. Woolf believes that any external changes targeted by political movements means women remain, fundamentally, dependent on an ordered patriarchal society for the definition of their social and political existence.

Woolf agrees with the fundamental demand of women’s rights but she wants to solve women’s issues through literary engagement. Political gestures are merely superficial for Woolf. Women’s history has no essence and is as bare and stingy as their dinner plate described in *A Room of One’s Own*. Unlike the male dinner menu with its excessive and opulent design and order—partridges come with a retinue of sauces and salads, thinly cut and soft boiled potatoes, and succulent sprouts just as pretty as rosebuds (*AROO*, 13)—the dinner plate in front of women is plain and boring with nothing that stirs the fancy: the rump is from a muddy market, and is served with “sprouts curled and yellowed at the edge.” (*AROO*, 22) The history of women has no beauty in it, and everything exists only for practical reasons. The

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<sup>85</sup> Alex Zwerdling, *Virginia Woolf and the Real World* (California: University of California Press, 1986), 214.



difference between tea for men and women is not simply an indicator of their financial status; it also symbolises the lack of an elaborated tradition and etiquette. No history of women is available for women; writing would have a positive contribution.

In the same way as claiming the lack of an elaborated tradition of prose writing, Woolf realises the same problem in women's history. Woolf believes novels should reflect life and should always adopt new outlooks to encompass their subjects; here, Woolf encourages women to write prose and make prose their own tools in creating a history. As a female writer addressing the issue of writing fiction, in *A Room of One's Own*, Woolf urges the need for novels which are about: "...women and what they are like, or... women and the fiction that they write; or... women and the fiction that is written about them; or... [something] all three are inextricably mixed together."

(*AROO*, 3) Her answers to improve the status of women are illustrated in *A Room of One's Own*, but more importantly she elaborates on why women should write fiction and her reasons reveal an underlying urge for a revolutionary form of the novel. Her revolution is an intellectual one, aiming to change every individual woman and make them think freely and act freely. Materialist independence is to bring intellectual beauty.

Female modernist writers need a voice. Woolf's central intention is to initiate or cope with the new social changes and to create a fundamentally different agenda from that of men. To accomplish this, a seed of revolution should be buried inside the minds of women. It is for this exact reason that Woolf encourages women to dive into the core of the revolution and start to write novels from their point of view, so that novels could no longer be only written by and about men. Woolf believes that the novel as an art form contains within itself a subtle power, which is strong enough to initiate societal changes. In "Women and Fiction", Woolf says: "[Life] is to be found in the lives of the obscure—in those almost unlit corridors of history where the figures

of generations of women are so dimly, so fitfully perceived. For very little is known about women. The history of England is the history of the male line, not of the female.”<sup>86</sup> Proposing a female voice is a more than a personal dedication, it is also a social revolution for women at Woolf’s time.

A novel is closely related to life; Woolf says: “for fiction... is not dropped like a pebble upon the ground, as science may be; fiction is like a spider’s web, attached ever so lightly perhaps, but still attached to life at all four corners.” (*AROO*, 53) This is the close tie between life and the novel that compels Woolf to convince women to devote themselves to writing, because novels “are the work of suffering human beings, and are attached to grossly material things, like health and money and the houses we live in.” (*AROO*, 53-54) With the suffragettes’ demand for the right to vote, Woolf wants women to look at themselves, look at the neglected history of women and to engage in acts of writing with the hope to restore what had been omitted, twisted, oppressed and suppressed. She wants women to bring their voice, which had long been replaced by male narratives, back and to elaborate on their own feelings, thoughts and stories. On another level, Woolf’s aim is to create modern women to write modern novels in order to achieve her goal of an androgynous world in which women are no longer left out nor confined to domesticity. Women can write and paint in the same way as they can contribute fully to society.

### The Art of Fiction

Lily asked herself in the last section of *To the Lighthouse*: “What does it mean then, what can it mean?” (*TTL*, 121) Lily has to know what her experience means before being able to represent it; she needs to understand Mrs. Ramsay’s passion of life in

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<sup>86</sup> Virginia Woolf, “Women and Fiction” in *Granite and Rainbow* (London: Hogarth Press, 1981), 76. Hereafter cited with abbreviation, *GR*.

order to place her on the canvas. In “The Narrow Bridge of Art”, Woolf mentions the “attitude toward life” (*GR*, 13) and writes that people with the right attitude are able to “use their faculties to the full upon things that are of importance.” (*GR*, 13) These people are not particularly happy or successful, “but there is a zest in their presence, and interest in their doings. They seem alive all over.” (*GR*, 13) As Patricia Waugh observes, “the novel is human life as poetry, a place where human life’s ordinary rhythms and processes of thinking might be poetically distilled and understood: as imagining, inferring, deliberating, deciding, remembering, forgetting, day-dreaming, planning, intending and problem-solving. But a novel is more specifically a process of thinking *into being* an imaginary world.”<sup>87</sup>

As if to think Mrs. Ramsay into being, Lily sat silently with Mrs. Ramsay in her imagination, silent and uncommunicative. “Who knows what we are, what we feel? Who knows even at the moment of intimacy This is knowledge?” (*TTL*, 141) The essence of the modern novel is the essence of that resonant term for Woolf, life, and both require a keen observation. Lily tries to make scenes of Mrs. Ramsay: whether it is called knowing people, thinking of them, or being fond of them; Lily “went on tunnelling her way into her picture, into the past” (*TTL*, 142) making her own thinking of Mrs. Ramsay and creating the being and existence of Mrs. Ramsay. Mrs. Ramsay’s passion in daily life and her artist’s attitude towards life eventually bring Lily closer to the scene. Lily wanted, “dipping her brush deliberately, to be on a level with ordinary experience, to feel simply that’s a chair, that’s a table, and yet at the same time, it’s a miracle, it’s an ecstasy.” (*TTL*, 164)

From these manifestoes and their claims poetic prose, her rejection of Edwardian Realism, to her revaluation of modern psychology, Woolf has been

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<sup>87</sup> Patricia Waugh, “‘Did I not banish the soul?’ Thinking Otherwise, Woolf-wise” in *Contradictory Woolf: Selected Papers from the Twenty-First Annual International Conference on Virginia Woolf*, edited by Derek Ryan and Stella Bolaki (Clemson, SC: Clemson University Digital Press, 2012), 23.

breaking and challenging the traditional concepts of boundaries. Woolf did not reveal what exactly those important things in life that require an “attitude towards life”, but she did say “Life is always and inevitably much richer than we who try to express it.” (*GR*, 23) So it might seem difficult to answer Lily’s question of what life means, and what can it mean; however, she answers the question herself by tunnelling into the past and thinking through with Mrs. Ramsay. Her painting, as mentioned above, is not only a picture of Mrs. Ramsay, it is also a picture of Lily’s Mrs. Ramsay. Thus, in the most poetic manner, Lily draws a line on her canvas with a sudden intensity and claims “I have had my vision.” (*TTL*, 170) In Lily’s vision, there is no separation of Mrs. Ramsay and I; dualism is replaced by the intimacy she longed for. The art of fiction is the art of life, in which the true picture of life is sublimated and presented in its most ordinary beauty.

## Chapter Three:

### Aspects of the Self and Time in De Quincey

In De Quincey's literary theory on the power of literature, though without explicit explaining, he places an implicit emphasis on those moments when the mind experiences an especially attuned sensibility to time. These moments of emotional significance do not originate only from ordinary experience, but from the experience of feeling a slice of life condensed in a flash of time; from a retrospective point of view, it might be argued that De Quincey's writing is largely devoted to the capture and representation of these moments in life. This chapter investigates De Quincey's concept and treatment of time, as well as his reasons for escaping from the "symbol, synchronic and spatial"<sup>88</sup> world of time in order to strive towards an ideal sense of self.

Drawing on Paul De Man's literary idea of "negative moments" proposed in "The Rhetoric of Temporality", Gerald Maa examines anachronism in the presentation of De Quincey's life. Maa summarises that among the Romantic writers, "De Quincey is a late Romantic publishing with Victorian means and concerns, De Quincey is a Romantic writing gothic novels, De Quincey is the untimely being of Modernism, De Quincey earned his minor fame much later than his peers."<sup>89</sup> Whether ahead of or behind his time, De Quincey's career as a writer is not readily located in a definite place within his own era. The negative moments, as Maa understands them, in De Quincey's life, act as "a moment of anachronism, the asynchronic moment, a diachronic alternative to the leave-taking of transcendence from the present" (128)

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<sup>88</sup> Thomas De Quincey, "Suspiria de Profundis" in *Confessions of an English Opium-Eater* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 127. Hereafter cited with abbreviation, *SP*.

<sup>89</sup> Gerald Maa, "Keeping Time with the Mail-Coach: Anachronism and De Quincey's 'The English Mail-Coach'," *Studies in Romanticism*, Vol. 50 (2011): 125.

and these moments are also apparent in his writing and manifest themselves as “a moment of change in the text” (127). By emphasising these moments, a sense of linear historical time loses its precedence and dominance. In De Quincey’s writing, time is given and presented with various attributes—elastic, suspended, subjective, salient and multi-layered—which liberate and assert the self.

### Saint Augustine’s Time Consciousness

Though not theorised little discussed, time is a deeply embedded concept in De Quincey’s writing. In “*Suspiria de Profundis*”, De Quincey writes:

In the *Opium Confessions* I touched a little upon the extraordinary power connected with opium (after long use) of amplifying the dimension of time. Space also it amplifies by degrees that are sometimes terrific. But time it is upon which the exalting and multiplying power of opium chiefly spends its operation. Time becomes infinitely elastic, stretching out to such immeasurable and vanishing termini, that it seems ridiculous to compute the sense of it on waking by expressions commensurate to human life. (*SP*, 106)

With the power of opium, De Quincey describes his extraordinary experience of visual mirages in his dreams incited by the unstable sense of time. However, time does not always have a personal dimension. The nature of time is a crucial question in Saint Augustine’s *Confessions*; it is in Augustine’s *Confessions* that time becomes consciously investigated. According to Augustine’s sense of time, what could not be more obvious is that we mark the year according to the birth of Christ; thus, time is always a concept with religious implications. Augustine attributes the mystery of time to God’s grand plan, claiming “Your Today is eternity”.<sup>90</sup> In Augustine’s view, the existence of God creates the existence of time and God is eternity. With the same logic, Augustine denies the idea of past and future, because only “the present” is the

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<sup>90</sup> Saint Augustine, *Confessions* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 230.

credible existence of time. In Augustine's scheme of God's constant presence in eternity, nothing passes before God and nothing arrives after God, therefore the concept of past time and future time cannot be valid. He asks "How can they "be" when the past is not now present and the future is not yet present?" (231) For Augustine, being present in God's eternity is the only testimony of existence, and whatever is not present cannot be understood as time. De Quincey is less influenced by Augustine's religious explanation of time than the interpreting power of human perception that is bestowed by Augustine's concept of time.

The importance of Augustine's quest for the understanding of time lies more in his internal meditation and dialectical debate than in the religious answer he provides. Augustine says to God that "My confession to you is surely truthful when my soul declares that times are measured by me" (239); however, regardless of God's grand plan of time, it is the mind that comprehends and perceives the existence of time. Augustine's emphasis on the human mind is a significant point at which the mind and its understanding of time are both highlighted and required for the further pursuit of the understanding of the self. "So it is in you, my mind, that I measure periods of time" (242), and it is in the interrelation between the mind's ability to understand time that Augustine further suggests that "present consciousness is what I am measuring" (242). Augustine's valuable contribution to the study of time is his clear implication that indicates that the conjoining nodal point of time and mind constitute the core of one's sense of self, and this paves the way for the literary engagement of De Quincey and other Romantics with the problematic understanding of time and mind in relation to the nature and experience of selfhood.

## Romantic Consciousness of Time

In Romantic literature, the discussion of time is often inextricable from the presentation and understanding of the self. Geoffrey Hartman proposes, in “Romanticism and Anti-Self-Consciousness”, that “Romanticism is a response to the problem of self-consciousness.”<sup>91</sup> Reading Hartman, Cynthia Chase concludes that he “describes art as conceived by the romantics as a remedy for the ills of thought, a cure drawn from consciousness itself for the disintegrative effects of self-consciousness” (5). This notion of self-consciousness is elaborated in relation to the Romantic perception of time, in which human consciousness obtains its most individualistic and free assertion when the concept of time is viewed with equal freedom. Christopher R. Miller suggests, in *The Invention of Evening*, that instead of regarding time as a medium of narrative, Romantic poetry “registers increments and lapses of time” and that every special moment in poetry is loaded with the poet’s own “temporality and historicity”.<sup>92</sup> Romantic poetry proposes a variety of different perspectives on the following aspects:

...the location of a self in an environment, the representation of temporal lapses, the dynamic between the continuous flux of the world and aesthetic closure of poems, and the intersection of private and public forms of time. (i)

Taking the invention of evening as his focus, Miller sees in Romanticism a subjective involvement and manipulation of the concept of time. His study examines the poets’ subjective interventions and challenges posed against the traditional concept of time, inspecting how Romantic poets place their emphasis on particular and subjective moments rather than on a unified flowing passage of time. Furthermore, the “temporality and historicity” that Romantic poetry contains should be understood as

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<sup>91</sup> Cynthia Chase ed., *Romanticism* (London: Longman, 1996), 5.

<sup>92</sup> Christopher R. Miller, *The Invention of Evening: Perception and Time in Romantic Poetry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 1-13.



the establishment of subjectivity both in these moments themselves and in the preservation of these moments.

### Coleridge's "Frost at Midnight"

Among Romantic poetry, Coleridge meditates on fragments of time and the relative positions on a historical scale. Coleridge temporarily avoids the continuous movement of time to contemplate the interaction of different spots of time from different subjective positions. Coleridge's conversation poem, "Frost at Midnight" investigates the multiplicity of time and the inevitable discrepant understandings of time by presenting the events in the poem against the background of both a timeless nature and the eternal language of God. In his poem, Coleridge introduces the perspective and understanding of what is now scientifically understood as the effect of parallax; parallax is a relational dynamic and an inevitable consequence of perceiving the same observed object from different viewing positions. In "Frost at Midnight", Coleridge displays multiple viewing selves projecting the sense of time based on the different reference points on the axis of time at which each stands, and each spot on the time scale results in a different perception of time. Unlike Augustine's belief in God's timelessness and eternity as they are manifested in the neutrality of nature, such concepts become vague without the poet's subjective involvement; Coleridge "registers increments and lapses of time" by investing in several significant moments of his life. His narrative of these moments brings to the surface a disturbing consciousness of temporality. Francis O'Gorman observes that Coleridge overthrows the stability of time, disobeying and questioning the integrity of linearity; O'Gorman believes Coleridge is always silently inviting his readers "to wonder what might come

next in a literary text”<sup>93</sup>. O’Gorman also points out that due to Coleridge’s own “fretful investment in inquiries about continuances at the end of the eighteenth century” (234), “A host of agitated questions about ‘what next?’ obtained their most concentrated form in ‘Frost at Midnight’.” (233) In Coleridge’s poem, these moments do not simply illuminate the important events in life but serve as coordinates which when preserved and joined together in writing create a personal history with a narrative past, present and future.

Coleridge tells the story of a narrator who is inspired by the natural sight of frost and recalls his own boyhood anticipations, as well as expressing his expectations of his sleeping son. Aside from the emphasised expectation of the unknown future, the narrative of the poem is involved with a disoriented outlook on time. The narrator looks into the future while having his lens turned back trying to preserve the past at the same time. The disoriented perception of time dispels the linear progression of time, and every futuristic outlook of the narrator is comprised of a retrospective glance at the past. The sense of time in the poem is an undetermined loop reiterating the anticipation of the future with a mixed nostalgia for the past. The indecisive point of view reflects a flexible understanding of time, and this flexibility represents the indefinite and positive attitude regarding the poet’s conscious interpretation of time.

The poet’s own perception of events embodies the will to interpret and decide the weight of these moments. O’Gorman suggests that “‘Frost at Midnight’ projected, with a lexis of surety, a prospect of the future built in part on the apparent assumption that to imagine what was to come, was, somehow, to compel it.” (235) To compel what is to come, the past acts as a significant influence shaping the narrator’s futuristic anticipation. In solitude, the narrator recalls his boyish school years and how

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<sup>93</sup> Francis O’Gorman, “Coleridge, ‘Frost at Midnight’, and Anticipating the Future”, *Romanticism*, Vol. 14 (2008): 232.

he was always in the mood of waiting and expecting: “How oft, at school, with most believing mind,/ Presageful, have I gazed upon the bars,/ To watch that fluttering stranger!”<sup>94</sup> Using his meditation on the past as the foundation for future expectations he has of his cradled baby, the narrator: “I was reared/ In the great city.../ But thou, my babe! shalt wander like a breeze/ By lakes and sandy shores...” (88) The narrator looks back in order to look forward, engaging in a retrospective act of defining the meaning of one’s history. In a similar manner, the younger poet as hopeful and anticipating boy in the schoolroom also wished for traces from the familiar past: “For still I hoped to see the stranger’s face,/ Townsman, or aunt, or sister more beloved,/ My play-mate when we both were clothed alike.” (88) Coleridge’s sense of time is a coherent rejection of the pre-defined concept of time; he introduces both the future and past in the forming of his current moment. Through engaging in defining the past and deciding the future, the power of subjective involvement is very pronounced. Miller observes that Coleridge “was always acutely conscious of adopting the role of a poet: ...aware of lyric utterance as an event in time.” (79) So, the writing of the poem is arguably not a recording of time, but an intervention in it, gesturing to itself as a happening event that alters or defines the past as well as the future. The overthrow of predetermined meaning and the need for definition is the same for present moments; like others, the current moment is a void without the signifying power of the other relative spots of time.

Writing is in itself a retrospective act in the sense that it can only happen after the event it describes but there is no ‘event’ as such—writing creates the event it purports to describe as a ‘reality-effect’. Assuming the writing of the poem happens as the meditation does, the act of writing would take the poet away from the current time

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<sup>94</sup> Samuel Taylor Coleridge, “Frost at Midnight” in *Samuel Taylor Coleridge: The Major Works, including Biographia Literaria*, ed. H. J. Jackson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 88.

spot of composing the poem to an earlier moment where the event is imagined to have taken place. Writing is similar to memory; memory in fact always recreates events and rewrites the past according to the pressures of the present moment. The circuit of how memory from, and of, the past decides the present feeling and understanding towards the writing of the past becomes a focus later in Woolf. Derrida's concept of *différance* explains the incongruity of the happening and the documenting of events, which originates from the lapses of time. Punning in French, Derrida gives *différance* both the implication of differing and deferral, so other than the temporal deferral. In Coleridge's "Frost at Midnight", the present moment contains references to the past and the future, and these allusions to the temporal differences between now and then are manifested with a sense of asynchronised deferral of time. The present moment will soon become the past and the future becomes the present is what McTaggart later proposes in *The Unreality of Time* (which has a direct influence on Woolf). If the present moment is defined by memory left by the past and soon will be replaced by the next moment and become the past, the present moment is never a securely anchored idea. Maa's observation of moments of anachronism in De Quincey finds an earlier resemblance in Coleridge's "Frost at Midnight", where the present moment itself is an undefined and unstable existence and an empty concept dependent upon other such temporal spots along the axis of time.

If the current moment depends upon other points, it is an invitation for the involvement of subjective thinking and interpretation. The thought process of the poet arranges the sense of time of the poem. An important aspect of being involved in the act of defining one's own life is the sovereignty therefore obtained. Miller, in his study, concludes that the greatest poetic achievement of Coleridge is that "he conceived of lyrics as a temporal process of thought." (79) In his study of Coleridge's influence on Wordsworth, James Davis claims that "For the moment, Coleridge embarks on a

temporal excursion to spiritual relief, made possible, in part, by his meditative departure from chronological time”.<sup>95</sup> To illustrate his point, Miller pushes Sarah Cameron’s statement about the Romantic resistance to full temporal disembodiment and claims that the Romantics “signally registered temporality—the movement of speech and thought.” (8) In other words, it is the progression of intellectual activity that determines the meaning of time, which in the act itself guarantees a sense of subjective sovereignty.

### Wordsworth’s Spots of Time

Wordsworth famously states that poetry is the ‘*spontaneous* overflow of powerful feeling’ that takes its origin from ‘emotions *recollected* in tranquillity’. While suggesting the relationship between good poetry and the genuine emotional response of the poet, Wordsworth implicitly expresses his concept of time. The two key words in the quotation, spontaneous and recollected, are both subjective concepts of time. In *The Prelude*, Wordsworth gives numerous examples of how he relates time to intellectual thoughts and the spiritual development of the poet, which finds an affinity with what has been discussed in this chapter—a sense of autonomous sovereignty.

Wordsworth devotes *The Prelude* to the writing of the moments infused with subjective significance, such as his father’s death, stealing a boat and climbing a mountain. These moments define what Wordsworth understood by “spots of time”:

There are in our existence spots of time,  
Which with distinct pre-eminence retain  
A renovating Virtue...  
This efficacious spirit chiefly lurks  
Among those passages of life in which  
We have had deepest feeling that the mind

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<sup>95</sup> James P. Davis, “The ‘Spots of Time’: Wordsworth’s Poetic Debt to Coleridge”, *Colby Quarterly*, Vol. 28 (1992): 74.

Is lord and master, and that outward sense  
Is but the obedient servant of her will.<sup>96</sup>

In defining “spots of time”, Wordsworth agrees with Augustine and Coleridge on the perceptive ability of the mind. Continuing to resonate with current events and generate new meanings, “spots of time” for Wordsworth are the experiences from the past which carry memory traces of his development as a poet. From a retrospective point of view, these moments obtain a lasting effect and importance when being written down in the poem as a separate event. Wordsworth writes in “Tintern Abbey” that the meanings of things are half perceived and half created. Therefore the meanings of these “spots of time” are created and secured for the second time when being recognised and performed in language. In the process of perceiving and creating, Wordsworth is alert to Coleridge’s subjective involvement in the narrative of time and recognises the identification of these “spots of time” is not an innocent acknowledgment of natural events but a conscious reinforcement of the meanings attached to and delivered by these spots of time. Davis observes that “Wordsworth found the spots of time structure [of Coleridge] quite congenial to his retrospective habits of mind, the form best suited to conveying emotions recollected in tranquillity, and it enabled him to compose what he called his ‘poem to Coleridge’.” (65) Taking the idea from Coleridge’s treatment of time, Wordsworth uses the “spots of time” to structure his narrative account of the growth of a poet’s mind and what he adapted from Coleridge’s poem is modified to “represent [how] consciousness in stream-of-consciousness works.” (67)

Following Wordsworth’s preference for personal time, these spots of time in Wordsworth’s poems are closely related to his spiritual formation as an adult and as a poet. Constantly looking back and analysing these moments helps Wordsworth to

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<sup>96</sup> William Wordsworth, *The Prelude in Wordsworth: The Major Works including The Prelude*, ed. Stephen Gill (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 565.

reveal his personality and the becoming of his mental growth is shaped. Early in *The Prelude*, Wordsworth recalls his guilt over being tempted to steal a boat and how nature, as the act of transgression, wakes his conscience. As “an act of stealth/ And troubled pleasure”, Wordsworth was tempted to loosen a skiff and “proudly rowed/ With his best skill.” (384-385) Yet, nature was with him and “the huge Cliff/ Rose up between me and the stars, and still,/ With measured motion, like a living thing,/ Strode after me” (385) that gave him an epiphanic revelation. Learnt from the guidance of nature, Wordsworth hurried and rowed back to the shore and returned the boat. However, this experience has since become an event that has a long-lasting affect on Wordsworth:

...in my thoughts  
There was a darkness, call it solitude,  
Or blank desertion, no familiar shapes...  
But huge and mighty Forms that do not live  
Like living men moved slowly through my mind  
By day and were the trouble of my dreams. (385)

The experience of stealing a boat carries a spiritual revelation to Wordsworth which haunts him forever, troubling his dreams. The event lurked in Wordsworth’s most private and personal mental realms and left an impact on his spiritual life.

In the section discussed above, nature is a silent presence. De Man “locates the key to an understanding of Wordsworth in the relationship of imagination not to nature, but to time.” (Chase, 19) In Wordsworth’s consciousness of time, the sense of self is an important element. Davis suggests that there is a hierarchy of time in Wordsworth’s scheme; in a distinguishable and qualitative order, the lowest concept of time is a manmade institution with a regulating power in the social dimension, it is “clock time, mechanical in the narrowest sense, inflexible and uncreative.” (80) Above it is nature’s time, the “Newtonian, a mathematical continuum, and also inflexible, but less artificial than clock time and more conducive to spiritual

well-being.” The highest of Wordsworth’s time schemes is “inner time, felt by the nerves and brain and lodged...in the queer element of the human spirit. This time is liberating and creative.” (80) The concept of time being liberating and creative is perceived subjectively, which means time is no longer a limiting factor for one’s subjective life and that through a sense of freedom from rigid historical time the subjective experiences at play constitute a positive force of creativity. The importance of individualistic time exceeds a collective social history for Wordsworth.

Summarising De Man’s study of Wordsworth’s “A Slumber Did My Spirit Seal”, Miller asserts that “the poem is not so much a verbal icon as a formal construction of thought.” (8) De Man’s assertion sums up his observation of Wordsworth’s idea of time and stresses the importance of the poet’s subjective and spiritual participation in the process of meditation and writing.

The reasons why *The Prelude* and many other poems such as “Lines Written A Few Miles above Tintern Abbey” are regarded as Wordsworth’s autobiographical poems are argued by critics to be related to the omission of a larger historical background available for the benefit of elaborating his subjectivity. In Alan Rawes’s “Romantic Form and New Historicism”, he rejects the one sided reading that understands “Tintern Abbey” as a poem of only internal emphasis, as critics such as Jerome McGann, Marjorie Levinson and Kenneth Johnson have suggested. He proposes that “Tintern Abbey” shows a dilemma that Wordsworth found himself trapped in, and the fundamental attitude of Wordsworth is ambivalent. Reading “Tintern Abbey” aligned with the tradition of English ode writing, Rawes suggests that in this poem, “Wordsworth depicts himself as both tied to the social and drawn to the solitary” and therefore ““Tintern Abbey’ is deeply ambivalent—double minded.”<sup>97</sup> Rawes thus encourages an open reading of the poems and recognises Wordsworth’s

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<sup>97</sup> Alan Rawes, ed., *Romanticism and Form* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 103; 105.



refusal to arrive at a reconciliation: “Romantic-period writers such as Wordsworth could save their highest praise for poetry of any kind that, far from offering solutions to or resolutions of problems, holds together, without reconciling, ‘conflicting feeling[s]’ and ‘contradictory thoughts’.” (112) It might be reckless to suggest that Wordsworth is only concerned with personal perception of the moments; yet it is obvious that his preferences rest here. Thus, it is probable that juxtaposing the conflicting feelings and contradictory thoughts is more true to the experience of the real for Wordsworth; when Augustine attributes all the unanswerables to God, Wordsworth, following the hints dropped by Coleridge, is moving towards a balanced overview of personal time surrounded by public time.

In Wordsworth’s time scheme, the difference between now and then is not simply a difference in time, it is also the presentation of selves in different times. As Davis points out, it is “temporal layering, a technique by which he makes his reader aware of two or more selves simultaneously.” (77) The importance of Wordsworth’s mental journey outweighs the chronological time because he is aware of the differences between two selves involved in the formation of thoughts—the “differences between the way he felt about an event at the time it occurred and the way he interprets at the time of composition” (76)—and is convinced that a self related to a sense of time could be defining creative power as a poet. As Davis also notes, Wordsworth’s treatment of time is “defying notions of time as sequence and dramatizing mental processes removed from time.” (77)

In “Tintern Abbey”, Wordsworth revisits the valley of the river Wye and reflects on his boyish days. Modelled on Coleridge’s “Frost at Midnight”, Wordsworth’s current moment is also a joint experience involving selves from the past, the present and the prospect of the future. Five years apart, standing on the bank of the river Wye, “The picture of the mind revives again:/ While here I stand, not only with the sense/

Of present pleasure, but with the pleasing thoughts/ That in this moment there is life and food/ For future years.” (133) Wordsworth in “Tintern Abbey” “presents numerous analogies to illustrate his looking back to previous times through lenses of the present” (Davis, 77) as he does in *The Prelude*. In this poem, Wordsworth values his personal development over the historical change during the lapse of time between his visits. While Coleridge involves perspectives between the selves in different moments in life, mixing a feeling of nostalgia and a futuristic prospect, Wordsworth juxtaposes a multi-layered perception of the self to elide the dominance of linear time. In Wordsworth’s moments, the layers of selves often consist of the past, the present and future selves. In his poems, the selves are clearly presented side by side, projecting the meaning of each other’s existence. In other words, the sense of a complete self is projected with the parallax effect generated among the different selves. For Augustine, the existence of self lies in the hands of God, and personal history with the idea of past, present and future has no real meaning. However, as we see in Coleridge and Wordsworth, the almighty power of God is no longer apparent and the poets endeavour to create their own narrative of a self with its own history and existence.

### Nature and Shelley’s Idealised History

Following St. Augustine, Coleridge and Wordsworth implant a new experiment in their treatment of time, making time a conceptual idea relying upon subjective projection rather than a given entity. De Quincey’s writing of time inherits the inward turn from Coleridge and Wordsworth to pursue a more explicit relation between the sense of time and his personal perception. Straying from his precursors, De Quincey does not hold God or nature as the inspirational muse; his turn is shared and observed

in Shelley's poems.

Shelley's poetry, like his Romantic peers, illustrates a connection between human emotions and the external world. However, Shelley's depiction of nature is different from that of the earlier poets, especially Wordsworth. Known as the poet of nature, Wordsworth is devoted to describing a harmonious relationship between human and nature. Nature is the source of inspiration, the comfort for distress, the answer to questions about where the dominating power of time resides. In "Tintern Abbey", Wordsworth writes about the peaceful landscape where his mind finds a place to rest and meditate; he claims that "Nature never did betray/ The heart that loved her". (123-124) The gentle and embracing nature is seen as generous, leading "From joy to joy" (126) "Through all the years of this our life" (125): "for she can so inform/ The mind that is with us, so impress/ With quietness and beauty, and so feed/ With lofty thoughts." (126-129) Wordsworth depicts nature as the stable background for his seemingly trivial and absorbing thoughts about time and life.

However, the Wordsworthian harmonious union of man and nature is questioned in Shelley's poetry. In Shelley's poems, nature is dark, indifferent, and a force whose grandeur and power teaches him humility. Nature exists for itself and not for man; in "Mont Blanc", Shelley's meditation on nature is a solitary one: "Dizzy Ravine! and when I gaze on thee/ I seem as in a trance sublime and strange/ To muse on my own separate fantasy/ My own, my human mind." (34-37) The destiny of man is disconnected from nature, and the ambiguous relationship between man and nature continues to be the focus of Shelley's poetic questioning. No longer answering to the human, Shelley questions nature: "And what are thou, and earth, and stars, and sea,/ If to the human mind's imaginings/ Silence and solitude were vacancy?" (142-144) In Shelley's poetic picture, man is independent from nature and the answers to questions about the relationship between life and time rest elsewhere.

In “Alastor”, Shelley explores further his scepticism about the harmony between man and nature; he expresses a similar feeling of disconnection from nature. In the preface, Shelley claims that the poem is an allegory representing a youthful poet in the solitary quest of contemplating nature: “for I have loved/ Thee ever, and thee only; I have watched/ Thy shadow, and the darkness of thy steps,/ And my heart ever gazed on the depth/ Of thy deep mysteries.” (18-23) Yet, nature is depicted as “Mother of this unfathomable world!” (18), unknown and undecipherable. The Coleridgean and Wordsworthian union with nature is no longer apparent in Shelley’s poetry. As Mark Sandy’s comparison suggests, while the “trinity ‘Of something far and more deeply interfused/ Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns/ And the round ocean and the living air’” helps Wordsworth “‘to see into the life of things’”, Shelley sees in nature “a darker realization that such revelation is merely an ‘incommunicable dream’.”<sup>98</sup>

A disjunction from nature in Shelley’s writing develops into an independent personal narrative in *De Quincey*, where nature is seldom the source of inspiration or the object of meditation. Shelley portrays a solitary wanderer in “Alastor” and in *De Quincey* the opium-eater is the outcast of society. Related to Shelley’s view of nature, time is often depicted as mystical and indifferent.

Unfathomable Sea! whose waves are years,  
 Ocean of Time, whose waters of deep woe  
 Are brackish with the salt of human tears!  
 Thou shoreless flood, which in thy ebb and flow  
 Claspest the limits of mortality,  
 And sick of prey, yet howling on for more,  
 Vomitest thy wrecks on its inhospitable shore;  
 Treacherous in calm, and terrible in storm,  
 Who shall put forth on thee,

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<sup>98</sup> Mark Sandy, “Quest Poetry: *Alastor and Epipsychidion*”, *The Oxford Handbook of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, eds. Michael O’Neill and Anthony Howe (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 274.

### Unfathomable Sea?<sup>99</sup>

Like the “unfathomable world”, the sea is a mystical representation of nature, and time is embedded in its ebbs and flows. In nature, Shelley realises the movement is not a regenerating cycle of life but a forward moving process ceaselessly replacing the old with the new. Nature’s indifferent coldness echoes the inevitable destiny of human mortality, within which human will is overpowered by the inhospitable natural passage of time. In Shelley’s poem, the coherent sense of time disintegrates when the time of nature becomes alienated from man’s quest for a solution to his temporality. In “Ode to the West Wind”, the poet recognises the power of nature and his own finality. The narrator begs the “Wild Spirit, which art moving everywhere/ Destroyer and Preserver” (13-14) to “lift me as a wave, a leaf, a cloud!” (53). However, the narrator is constrained by his human inability in the presence of time: “I fall upon the thorns of life! I bleed!/ A heavy weight of hours has chained and bowed/ One too like thee: tameless, and swift, and proud.” (54-56) Men’s temporal existence, compared to the untimely natural world, seems powerless and insignificant.

The frustrated poet-speaker in “Ode to the West Wind” finds his hope in a spiritual approach: “Drive my dead thoughts over the universe/ Like withered leaves to quicken a new birth!/ And, by the incantation of this verse,/ Scatter, as from an unextinguished hearth/ Ashes and sparks, my words among mankind! Be through my lips to unawakened earth/ The trumpet of a prophecy!” (61-69) Shelley introduces a shift of tone in his poem; he shifts from longing for longevity in nature to the hope that his creativity could be a long-lasting asset asserting his spiritual importance, which could be as revelatory as the West wind, and exist beyond his natural time. In nature, where there is neither a beginning nor an end, the idea of history is an invalid

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<sup>99</sup> Percy Bysshe Shelley, “Time”, Published by Mrs. Shelley, “Posthumous Poems”, 1824.  
(<http://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/4800/pg4800.html>)

one. A new insight of time is needed for the appreciation of human history.

Shelley sees the human limit as an inevitable fate in the axis of time; we could argue that mortality defines human existence. However, spiritual existence escapes the predicament of physicality and thus Shelley wishes his poetry could reach beyond the temporal and spatial confines of his own self. Shelley develops different transcendental points of view in order to raise the possibility of human longevity and he believes that his poetry is his spiritual incarnation that should have a prolonged life. A futuristic expectation of poetic heritage is also noted in *A Defence of Poetry*. In the comparison between a poem and a story, time is what “destroys the beauty and the use of the story of particular facts, stripped of the poetry which should invest them, arguments that of Poetry” (680) because a story does not convey a shared human nature that is universal regardless of time and space. However, poetry, wanting to shine forever, hopes for future existence. “A poet is a nightingale who sits in darkness”, who sings the song of poetry that

...acts in a divine and unapprehended manner, beyond and above consciousness: and it is reserved for future generations to contemplate and measure the mighty cause and effect in all the strength and splendour of their union. (680)

Shelley, similarly to De Quincey, puts his hopes in the future, waiting for his work to “be impanelled by Time from the selectest of the wise of many generations.” (680)

In “Alastor”, the young poet finds a sudden revelation in “speechless” (123) nature and witnesses the “birth of time” (128): “ever gazed/ And gazed, till meaning on his vacant mind/ Flashed like strong inspiration, and he saw/ The thrilling secrets of the birth of time” (125-128). Sandy argues that, after the poet’s solitary mediation, this is the answer to his “quest for self-knowledge” which “becomes a search for meaning across time and space amongst the ruins of civilization.” (279) Sandy’s reading suggests that the birth of time is a personal growth from relying on nature to

building faith in the spiritual capacity of the poet himself and concludes that “Through uncovering the origins of time itself and translating the hieroglyphs, the poet-figure emerges as a consciousness more far-seeing” (279) who is able to see the gulf between reality and his idealised visions. This “birth of time” takes place in the poet’s vacant mind, rendering sufficient the poet’s own self-knowledge that enables him to see the difference between reality and his transcendental vision. The transcendental vision here implies not a religious pantheism but a break from depending on the rigid frame provided by the factual world, and this independence is also an encouragement to look inside the self. A sense of time, more personal than communal, is seeded into the poet’s mind. While the objective time has the dominant power, the birth of personal consciousness of time distances the union of nature and man and gives man his own narrative of time.

### The Opium-Eater and His Confessions

Reading Romantic poetry, Miller claims that “Rather than making the world vivid in language, Wordsworth is now more interested in describing the workings of consciousness: the ways in which the mind represents past experience to itself in abstract or symbolic terms” (87). In other words, how the human mind comprehends time and how its perception of time affect the sense of self are crucial to Romantic consciousness. De Quincey’s writing exhibits the same inherited focus on the subjective manipulation of time as a means to assert individuality and subjectivity as a writer.

After Augustine, writers have been trying to locate the problem of time, especially its relation with the subjective knowledge of self. While Coleridge represents a parallax view of time, and Wordsworth juxtaposes different temporal moments, De Quincey’s consciousness of time is both less conventional and more

internalised (inspired by his opium experiences). De Quincey claims “it had never once occurred to [him] to think of literary labours as a source of profit” (*COE*, 24) but financial difficulty is the reason for De Quincey’s career as a magazine writer.<sup>100</sup> Driven by financial struggle, chased by deadlines, distressed about the break with Wordsworth, De Quincey’s frustration goes without saying. At the same time, the habit of using opium has a negative impact on his writing; De Quincey blatantly states “Opium took away the central creative ‘nexus’ so that extended work became impossible. The writer acquired a ‘disgust’ for his own work and would leave it unfinished rather than face completing or revising it” (Lindop, 391). De Quincey recognises the negative effect imposed on his “reflective and conscientious mind” which results in an inability and an idle inertia leaving him “the sense of incapacity and feebleness...direct embarrassments incident to the neglect or procrastination of each day’s appropriate duties.” (Lindop, 67) At this point, the running of external time is on a different track; De Quincey’s focus on his own state of inertia is dissociated from the movements of external reality.

De Quincey, however, was fascinated by his dreams and fantasy life long before his opium habit; the anaesthetic and hallucinating power of opium only further excites his mental activities. In the *Confessions*, De Quincey repeatedly emphasises that dreams are the focus of his autobiographical work and opium is what conjures up those magnificent dreams; as he says, the true hero of his autobiographical writing is the opium, not the opium-eater, because opium is “the legitimate centre on which the interest revolves.” (*COE*, 78) De Quincey is certainly convinced that his life is the reflection of his inner self and therefore these adventures should be regarded “as furnishing a key to some parts of that tremendous scenery which afterwards peopled

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<sup>100</sup> Grevel Lindop, *The Opium-Eater: A Life of Thomas De Quincey* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), 238.



the dreams of the Opium-eater.” (*COE*, 78) In De Quincey’s opium-dreams, time is where opium chiefly casts its power. Time becomes an immeasurable concept beyond comprehension for there is no proper measurement for it. Thus, “in valuing the *virtual* time lived during some dreams, the measurement by generations is ridiculous—by millennia is ridiculous: by aeons, I should say, if aeons were more determinate, would also be ridiculous.” (*SP*, 106) For De Quincey, with the excitement and stimulation brought to his mind by opium, he represents and characterises time as exceeding ordinary comprehension and measurement of natural time.

#### De Quincey’s Denial of Clock Time

A different and almost alien perception of time acts as a barrier between De Quincey and the external world, distancing De Quincey from the march of history. De Quincey admits that the curse of his disease “was to meditate too much, and to observe too little” (*COE*, 48); he is careless about what happens outside of his mind because “an opium-eater is too happy to observe the motion of time.” (*COE*, 48) Opium brought to De Quincey a sense of passive inertia towards the outside world and made him retreat further into his mind:

And at that time I often fell into these reveries upon taking opium; and more than once it has happened to me, on a summer night, when I have been at an open window, in a room from which I could overlook the sea at a mile below me, and could command a view of the great town of L---, at about the same distance, that I have sate from sunset to sunrise, motionless, and without wishing to move. (*COE*, 48)

De Quincey lists the differences between alcohol and opium and states “no quantity of opium ever did, or could intoxicate.” (*COE*, 40) However, his dependence on opium makes him no less an addict. The level of psychological comfort and sense of security that De Quincey obtains under the shelter of opium greatly influences what opium

does to his mental perceptions. As De Quincey argues, “If a man ‘whose talk is of oxen,’ should become an Opium-eater, the probability is, that (if he is not too dull to dream at all)—he will dream about oxen” (*COE*, 5); De Quincey’s inactivity under the power of opium reveals his retreat into his inner world when his writing is nothing but writing about opium. In another world, De Quincey’s dependence on opium is his dependence on his internal perceptions of his dependency.

Maa sees in De Quincey’s incoherent emphasis on the internal and the dissociation from the external, a sense of anachronism, in which things are “out of harmony with the present” (126), and the sense of anachronism is translated into his writing tactic. “Anachronism”, Maa explains, “is nothing but that parasitic supplement for the present” (127) and “anachronism [is] defined by an assumed non-existence. Its existence is subjunctive.” (127) According to Maa, anachronism is a non-existence adopted to stray away from the present, and it is a denial of the dominance of clock time. Maa’s elaboration on De Man’s idea about negative moments, regards the way that “the human subject rejects the spatial world of the symbol for the temporality of allegory, affirming his or her temporal distinction from the natural world” (127). Maa further suggests that De Quincey employs creative writing to fulfil the condition of non-existence while rejecting the symbolism of the spatial world. Aligning this condition of non-existence with De Quincey’s own order, Maa concludes that De Man’s idea of the negative moment is “a moment of anachronism, the asynchronic moment, a diachronic alternative to the leave-taking of transcendence from the present” and it “is a vertiginous and troubled moment of presence” (128), a moment to rebel against the predetermined system governed by time. He applies these asynchronic moments to his observation of De Quincey’s life and writing and helps to bring us to have a closer look at De Quincey’s moments of falling outside of time.

In the discussion above, time becomes synonymous with the external world,

and it is inevitable that personal time is incoherent and fragmented. If external time is rigid, ordered and predictable, inner time is everything that is opposite. So De Quincey rejects categorising his writings according to the linear progression of time. In the *Confessions*, De Quincey pleads for himself and apologises for not being able to give a chronological narrative. To explain the reasons for the irregular and disconnected narrative of the *Confessions*, De Quincey says:

I give the notes disjointed as I find them, or have now drawn them up from memory. Some of them point to their own date, some I have dated, and some are undated.... Sometimes I speak in the present, sometimes in the past tense. (*COE*, 62)

De Quincey's rejection is evident, and obedience to the dominance of nature time/clock time is already an idea that has been overthrown by Coleridge and Wordsworth, the poets he most respects. Similar to his admired poets who think about selves presented at different points of time yet to come, De Quincey places himself "at a distance of fifteen or twenty years ahead of this time, and suppose [himself] writing to those who will be interested about me hereafter." (*COE*, 63) This futuristic perspective of writing is the projection of De Quincey's wish to transcend or escape his present era, and put his hope in the days to come. His uneasy attitude towards his own incongruous relation with time is revealed in a description of writings on a palimpsest:

What would you think, fair reader, of a problem such as this—to write a book which should be sense for your own generation, nonsense for the next, should revive into sense for the next after that, but again become nonsense for the fourth... (*SP*, 141)

De Quincey's comparison between the palimpsest and the human mind will be discussed later; however, from the above quotation, De Quincey implicitly suggests his own uncertainty about the appropriateness of his writing. The harmonious relationship between his time and himself is not easily attainable.

In De Quincey's writings, it is evident that these negative moments act as a disturbing revolution of linear time, provide him with a generous freedom of writing and will, liberating him from the cold mechanism of clock time. Distancing himself from the present and refusing the dominance of time is a direct way of empowering the author of the autobiography. De Quincey's refusal to follow chronological time nor does he believe that the presence of anachronism in his autobiography should affect the credibility of his writing:

Whenever it could answer my purpose to transplant them from the natural or chronological order, I have not scrupled to do so....Few of the notes, perhaps, were written exactly at the period of time to which they relate; but this can little affect their accuracy, as the impressions were such that they can never fade from my mind. (*COE*, 62)

De Quincey says "Much has been omitted" in his own recollection of the past, and thus he "could not, without effort, constrain [himself] to the task of either recalling, or constructing into a regular narrative, the whole burthen of horrors which lies upon my brain." (*COE*, 62) However, what De Quincey tries to focus on is the subjective truth perceived and defined in his mind, which is not a single narration but a joint sense of self consisting of the numerous selves glimpsed at different points in time under the magnificent mechanism of how his mind operates. De Quincey's understanding of time determines his definition of truth as well as his literary focus on the internal; this finds the approval of Woolf given her modernist rejection of Realist novels and Victorian biographies. This also speaks to Woolf's recognition that the superficial and factual piling up of character descriptions does not add up to the real depiction of a human being.

### The Palimpsest and the Human Mind

De Quincey's confidence in the power of his mind is supported by the analogy

between the human mind and the palimpsest, in which he finds his belief in the durability and consistency of his memory:

...in our own heaven-created palimpsest, the deep memorial palimpsest of the brain, there are not and cannot be [any] incoherencies. The fleeting accidents of a man's life, and its external shows, may indeed be irrelative and incongruous; but the organizing principles which fuse into harmony, and gather about fixed predetermined centres, whatever heterogeneous elements life may have accumulated from without, will not permit the grandeur of human unity greatly to be violated, or its ultimate repose to be troubled in the retrospect from dying moments, or from other great convulsions. (*SP*, 144)

De Quincey internalises Augustine's belief in God as a belief in the mighty mechanism of the mind. The unity and harmony that Augustine finds in God is found by De Quincey in the mental capability of the brain. For De Quincey, given the right stimulant, such as opium, old memories are revived again:

The minutest incidents of childhood, or forgotten scenes of later years, were often revived: I could not be said to recollect them, for if I had been told of them when waking, I should not have been able to acknowledge them as parts of my past experience. But placed as they were before me, in dreams like intuitions, and clothed in all their evanescent circumstances and accompanying feelings, I *recognised* them instantaneously. (*COE*, 69)

The idea delivered in this paragraph is significant in confirming De Quincey's understanding of the human mind and his assumption that the mind works as a palimpsest. A palimpsest, as De Quincey explains, is "a membrane or a roll" capable of being "cleansed of its manuscript by reiterated successions." (*SP*, 139) The magic character of the palimpsest is that: "The traces of each successive handwriting, regularly effaced, as had been imagined, have, in the inverse order, been regularly called back." (*SP*, 143)

A palimpsest-like mind manifests its power of preserving and revealing memories, rejoining a seemingly lost history and establishing De Quincey's own

sense of his personal time. In *Suspiria de Profundis*, the sequence to the *Confessions*, De Quincey uses the palimpsest as an example to show how the human mind works when we presume time should efface memory:

Although it has been erased and overwritten again and again, the ancient sheet of vellum retains traces of all the words ever inscribed upon its surface, much as the mind holds on to the vestiges of each past experience.<sup>101</sup>

As De Quincey suggests, “the previous written layers of the palimpsest can be brought into clearer focus with the application of modern chemicals”. In a similar way, like the modern chemical catalyst, opium makes the past accessible and “vividly restores to the dreaming mind such painful experiences as those recounted in the essay’s first section, ‘The Affliction of Childhood’.” (xix) Sarah Dillon in *The Palimpsest* suggests that instead of being fascinated by “the simultaneity of arrangement under which the past events of life” are assembled, De Quincey appealed to the “phenomenon of the resurrection” of those otherwise long buried life events.<sup>102</sup> Resurrection is an idea related to death, and De Quincey’s observations on the palimpsest of the mind “reassures him that all the impressions made on it ‘are not dead but sleeping’” and that even when things appear invisible or disappeared, “nothing can properly and truly die.” (28) In contrast to external time, De Quincey’s personal time now becomes the synonym of memory and the knowledge of the self depends much upon the revealing of these memories.

Dillon points out that “The palimpsest does not conform structurally to a psychoanalytic model of surface and depth, latent and manifest” and therefore those immersed and emergent moments in De Quincey’s mind do not order themselves in any chronological way. The meaning of these moments is not based on accuracy of

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<sup>101</sup> Barry Milligan, “The Literary Tradition of Self-incrimination” in the introductory section of *Thomas De Quincey: Confessions of an English Opium-Eater and Other Writings* by Thomas De Quincey (Penguin: London, 2003), xix.

<sup>102</sup> Sarah Dillon, *The Palimpsest: Literature, Criticism, Theory* (London: Continuum, 2007), 27.

corresponding events in the timeline, but on their effect of affirming the mental capacity of human mind; the mind preserves what is constituted as De Quincey's realisation of subjectivity. In the palimpsest, De Quincey sees his mind overpowering the flow of time:

I feel assured, that there is no such thing as *forgetting* possible to the mind; a thousand accidents may and will interpose a veil between our present consciousness and the secret inscriptions on the mind; accidents of the same sort will also rend away this veil; but alike, whether veiled or unveiled, the inscription remains for ever, just as the stars seem to withdraw before the common light of day, whereas in fact we all know that it is the light which is drawn over them as a veil, and that they are waiting to be revealed when the obscuring daylight shall have withdrawn. (COE, 69)

Just as a palimpsest, "by our modern conjurations of science, secrets of ages remote from each other have been exorcised from the accumulated shadows of centuries" (SP, 143), the memories a mind withholds could be revived with proper means. There is no forgetting, and thus no dying. Time becomes for De Quincey an almost irrelevant concept, and the temporality of human beings is somehow redeemed through the mind's capacity of not being able to forget.

If hyperthymesia means human memory could overpower the dominance of time and the sense of loss, the reasons behind De Quincey's obsession with autobiographical memories becomes apparent—he clings to the early deaths of his sister, Ann and Wordsworth's daughter, which reappear constantly in his writings. Remembering is a way of inscribing, and so is writing. Neatly juxtaposing the human mind and the palimpsest, De Quincey claims:

What else than a natural and mighty palimpsest is the human brain? Such a palimpsest is my brain; such a palimpsest, O reader! is yours. Everlasting layers of ideas, images, feelings, have fallen upon your brain softly as light. Each succession has seemed to bury all that went before. And yet in reality not one has been extinguished. (SP, 144)

In the analogy of a palimpsest, De Quincey makes important observations of the human mind and its independence from time. Memories are not forgotten and time does not necessarily have the power of a ruthless eraser; instead, memories (though they appear to take places in a successive order in time and are seemingly overtaken by newcomers), actually occupy sensational and pictorial coexistences in the human mind. Here then linear time does not have the capacity to assert its dominance. De Quincey's finding enhances his pursuit of the internal realm of subjectivity and foreshadows Woolf's modern adaptation of examining subjectivity in her writing of mental processes.

The focus on the mind is pervasive among De Quincey's writings and traces are everywhere. He weaves his descriptions of the mind, observations of the dream, and his conclusions into his writings. In the *Confessions*, the centre of the writing falls on opium and the incited dreams; in *Suspiria*, as the sequel to the *Confessions*, De Quincey further elaborates his knowledge on the mind, and in *The English Mail-Coach*, De Quincey also depicts how the travel with the national mail-coach is internalised and absorbed into his mind and becomes part of personal experience. *The English Mail-Coach* is a tribute to British achievements in modern day transportation, but it is also a tribute to the magnificence of the mind. De Quincey regards the mail-coach as a method of transportation not only for travelling geographically but also mentally. The external travel experiences with the mail-coach become his internal inscriptions, which are powerful enough to have a long lasting meaning and value to him in the formation of his mind.

As a vehicle for travelling, the mail-coach always moves forwards and takes De Quincey into what is unknown and unexplored, but the mind preserves whatever seems to be left behind and projects these impressions into haunting dreams. De Quincey records one frightful event where he luckily avoided the crash and managed



to resume his travel at the end of “The Vision of Sudden Death”:

The moments were numbered. In the twinkling of an eye our flying horses had carried us to the termination of the umbrageous aisle; at right-angles we wheeled into our former direction; the turn of the road carried the scene out of my eyes in an instant, and swept it into my dreams for ever. (COE, 225)

When the mail-coach continues its journey, the mind, like a palimpsest, through its powerful mechanism records everything that is left behind. Sometime in the future, De Quincey is able to retrieve this journey in his dreams. The moving of the mail-coach is a symbol of the speed of modernity. It is necessary to assume that the sense of time is different on a mail-coach and in pastoral nature because the mind perceives it differently. Furthermore, time only moves forwards, but the mind could be impatient for anticipation or nostalgia for the past. The dimension of time and its implication becomes multi-folded and various. Understanding the perceptual aspect of time, writing his life according to the rhythm of his mind rather than the tick of a clock becomes his aesthetic decision.

The mail-coach stands for the advanced vehicle; it travels fast and surpasses old notions of travel. However, inexplicitly, De Quincey seems to compare the travel with the mail-coach and the far grander journey of his mind. In his dreams, with the mechanism of the mind, he could always travel beyond any human experiences. He describes such powers of the mind in the *Confessions*:

The sense of space, and in the end, the sense of time, were both powerfully affected.....Space swelled, and was amplified to an extent of unutterable infinity. This, however, did not disturb me so much as the vast expansion of the time; I sometimes seemed to have lived for 70 or 100 years in one night; nay, sometimes had feelings representative of a millennium passed in that time, or, however, of a duration far beyond the limits of any human experience. (COE, 68)

Though induced by opium, De Quincey’s sense of time reflects the dominance of the mind in human perception. Overwhelmingly manipulative, the power of the mind

could only be estimated when juxtaposed, by De Quincey, with the experience of modern day transportation.

### Time in Dreams and Death

The use of opium greatly changes De Quincey's experience and perception of time. To utilise the effect of opium in a positive way, De Quincey depicts the dreams incited by opium and considers them to be philosophically enlightening for his readers. In an artistic way, these depictions of his mental changes consequent upon the work of opium trigger a closer look at the work of the human mind in his writing. Unlike Wordsworth— where the understanding of the mind is related to his spiritual growth and maturation—De Quincey's observation is a record of the intricate working of the mind in its daily activities. It is a literary presentation of a pseudo-scientific report. After taking opium, De Quincey observes that his perception of things changed, and these changes of perception explain the level of susceptibility of the mind:

The sense of space, and in the end the sense of time, were both powerfully affected. Buildings, landscapes, &c., were exhibited in proportions so vast as the bodily eye is not fitted to receive. Space swelled, and was amplified to an extent of unutterable infinity. (*COE*, 68)

As the opium-eating habit takes effect on his perception, his normal understanding and experience of space and time are redefined. De Quincey says opium excites his nerves and incites corresponding night time dreams and day time reveries with an unusual magnificence and splendour that his waking and sober life could not imagine: “at the same time a corresponding change took place in my dreams; a theatre seemed suddenly opened and lighted up within my brain, which presented nightly spectacles of more than earthly splendour.” (*COE*, 68) Such experience is inspirational; De Quincey's muse is not God, nor nature, but opium. Being a powerful sensational

experience challenging his perception and understanding, this is also listed by De Quincey as one of the most unbearable pains induced by opium. His description of time exhibits this anxiety:

This, however, did not disturb me so much as the vast expansion of time; I sometimes seemed to have lived for 70 or 100 years in one night—nay, sometimes had feelings representative of a millennium passed in that time, or, however, of a duration far beyond the limits of any human experience. (*COE*, 68)

De Quincey's anxiety comes from a disoriented sense of time because of the feeling of not being able to comprehend the temporal; time is challenged and irregular and time is the opposite of being linear and predictable. Time could be perceived as elastic, which prolongs De Quincey's life to the feeling of having lived for almost a century. Time is also perceived as contracted: it is also full of symbolic moments that bring the past events in life together in one picture: "In a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, every act—every design of...the past lived again—arraying themselves not as a succession, but as part of a coexistence." (*SP*, 145) De Quincey experiences an unstable sense of time where time has lost its undisturbed integrity but obtained various new possibilities.

Built upon De Quincey's long fascination with the unknown world of the human mind, using opium to enhance his exposure to the unknown world is an obvious path for him to have taken. Under the spell of opium, time becomes an unstable concept depending on the subject's perception. It is especially so in De Quincey's dreams. In "The English Mail-Coach", De Quincey fuses travel and dreams to one another to depict the asynchronised moving of clock time and his mental time. De Quincey uses the mail-coach to start his travel writing, but his "writing is so thoroughly interiorized that he largely abdicates the travel writer's duty of passing on

some knowledge of the world.”<sup>103</sup> In other words, “The English Mail-Coach” is more concerned with an inward experiencing of time than about the factual strata of his travel. The English mail-coach is a modern invention and a national pride; however, the opium-eater is too otherwise preoccupied to care about the moving of time. Even when undertaking the journey with the aid of modern transportation, the symbol of the fast moving society, De Quincey takes things at his own internal pace and revisits these experiences through and in his dreams where he does not find himself disconnected.

In “The English Mail-Coach”, dreams are where memories are stored and restaged. As a matter of fact, De Quincey does not use the word “memory” very often in the work; if there is anything unforgettable, it would stay in his dreams. Towards the end of “The Vision of Sudden Death”, upon the look of the frightened lady after the accident, De Quincey exclaims: “But the lady--! Oh heavens! will that spectacle ever depart from my dreams.” (*MC*, 224) Though it was an event of only ninety minutes, the moment is condensed in his mind and leaves a life-long impression on De Quincey.

The moments were numbered. In the twinkling of an eye our flying horses had carried us to the termination of the umbrageous aisle; at right-angles we wheeled into our former direction; the turn of the road carried the scene out of my eyes in an instant, and swept it into my dreams for ever. (*MC*, 225)

The mail-coach transported De Quincey ahead into the future, but the events that happened were not left behind. They become memories of De Quincey and were ‘swept into’ the realm of dreams becoming those invisible but timeless incidents remembered by the mind. For De Quincey, the mind is where experiences and memories accumulate, like a palimpsest. Through dreams, the epitome of one’s life,

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<sup>103</sup> Robin Jarvis, “The Glory of Motion: De Quincey, Travel, and Romanticism”, *The Yearbook of English Studies*, Vol. 34 (2004), 87.

the external experiences and internal memories, conquer the temporality of human life. Antonio Damasio explains that the disintegration and merging of one's perception and memories both depend on a congruous sense of time.<sup>104</sup> Damasio suggests that it is economical for the brain to "integrate separate processes into meaningful combinations by means of time" (95) and chaotic brain events occur when "mistiming" occurs. With Damasio's argument in view, De Quincey's opium mind might be reinterpreted as exhibiting timeless attributes, in which everything is organised in a harmonious order with "celestial pleasure".

From the close encounter with death, a sense of time is crystallised permanently. Unlike the opium experience where time appears to be elastic and over-arching, with the suggestion of death, time is presented in a much more comprehensible manner. It is comprehensible in the way that death draws an end to the otherwise forever moving time and the concept of infinity is, however, presented as a figment of the imagination rather than a meaningful entity. Death also draws the difference between the eternity of nature and the mortality of man. In the *Confessions*, several deaths endlessly haunt De Quincey. Summer, for De Quincey, is the season of mediating death because the atmosphere of the sun is "much more fitted to be types and characters of the Infinite" (*COE*, 75). Death is ambiguous in its nature, because it terminates an otherwise ongoing event but also carries the intriguing connotation of an infinite unknown. De Quincey shows little urge to probe into the nature of death, but is haunted by the fear of it. He understands death through his opium experiences and his writing resonates with an experience of another that is also shared with him:

I was once told by a near relative of mine, that having in her childhood fallen into a river, and being on the very verge of death but for the critical assistance which reached her, she saw in a moment her whole life, in its

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<sup>104</sup> Antonio Damasio, *Descartes' Error: Emotion, Reason, and the Human Brain* (London: Vintage, 2006).

minutest incidents, arrayed before her simultaneously as in a mirror; and she had a faculty developed as suddenly for comprehending the whole and every part. (*COE*, 69)

Death, though, aborts one's life by drawing an end, operating much like a full stop in a sentence. Death sums up the narrative of life and provides a point for retrospection. The subjective sense of time is introduced and elucidated with a definite point of ending, giving life a closure with both a beginning and an end in which the meaning of life as a span can take shape.

In "Alastor", Shelley too constantly describes death. As Miller observes, "Traditionally, evening is a time of meditative repose, but here that privileged moment is swallowed up by the crashing sublime revelation of the Poet's deathward quest" (115). Miller draws on Walter Benjamin to examine Shelley's narration and suggests "Alastor" "involves a fundamental curiosity about endings, particularly death." (114) Shelley's representation of death in the poem is understood by Miller as "a Shelleyan preoccupation with the inevitable victory of Time over the individual's intuition." (114) Death, in Miller's study, illuminates the truth of the world, helping the poet to witness "the manifestation of earthly time" (114). From the viewpoint of the poet, actually, death acts as the ultimate distinguishing moment, segregating individual time and nature time; in death, personal time would have no existence; however, it is also in death, paradoxically, that the meaning of one's life becomes clear. To eliminate the careless hallucination that human beings move forward with time, death intrudes and provides a point for a meaningful sense of self.

In John Murphy's study, death and other significant moments contribute to the lyrical element of Shelley's "Alastor". While narrative poems demonstrate the socially oriented sense of time, lyrical moments are devoted to the depiction of personal sentiments. Murphy is convinced that setting nature's seasonal cycles against human life, the poet gains "a deeper sense of time in which the self not only performs actions

and engages in events in accord with nature's cycles, but achieves a level of historicity by identifying the arc of these activities in terms of its own extension between birth and death".<sup>105</sup> With the marking effects of their events of birth and death, a clearer concept of past, present and future thus emerges, which suggests a history is established. In one sense, death makes these moments in life salient; and in the other, with a personal history, the differentiation between the subjective and the objective world is granted effortlessly. In the last two sentences of "Alastor", Shelley depicts the relationship between the world and the self after the intervention of death as "Nature's vast frame, the web of human things/ Birth and grave, that are not as they were".<sup>106</sup>

#### Self and Moments of Sublimity

De Quincey expresses his frustration at not being able to comprehend the nature of time when particular moments are invested with unusual extremity and infinity. However, when death proposes finality to his consciousness of time, De Quincey also finds his sense of time is compressed into an inscrutable series of moments. The uncertainty about time is more of a self-reflective question about his subjectivity than curiosity about time. Though time related, these moments are a testimony of his sense of self in that the capability of the self is challenged by an unfamiliar sense of time. In the understanding of time and the world at large, there is always a comprehension of self. When time appears momentarily mystical, the frustrated sense of self in relation to such inscrutable moments also draws De Quincey's interest.

Aside from dreams, opium induces trances, and the feeling of oppressing death,

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<sup>105</sup> John F. Murphy, "Time's Tale: The Temporal Poetics of Shelley's "Alastor"", *Keats-Shelley Journal*, Vol. 45 (1996): 134.

<sup>106</sup> Percy Bysshe Shelley, "Alastor" in *Shelley: The Major Works, including poetry, prose and drama* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 111.

De Quincey is attracted to cases of murder in which the particular moments in time are relevant to the appreciation of art and the revelation of the self. Similar to what De Quincey sees in opium dreams and in the suggestion of death, there is a sense of inability in human comprehension when one is confronted with extreme experiences such as a brutal murder. In *On Murder*, De Quincey felt a loss of the grip of time. He first elaborates on losing the grip of time and self through the Kantian idea of sublime.

In *On Murder*, De Quincey touches upon the extreme experience that Williams's murder brought to him. As a spectator, the enjoyment he had of the brutal murder is a complex process from feeling frustrated by the unknown cause of murder to a suspension of temporal morality to the final advancement of self-knowledge. The experience is internalised and projected with a subjective value of enhancing self-knowledge. As discussed before, the feeling of sublime experiences requires an extended understanding and imaginative response from the audience. But the process of feeling the sublime moments also involves a surrender to and reconstruction of the subject's capability of perception. To experience the sublime, the subject has to be disinterested in time, space, and reality. In front of sublime experiences, the subject encounters his own inability to understand his perception; instead of trying to come to a rational understanding of his perception, the act of suspending his pre-obtained knowledge is not only inadequate but needs to be discarded entirely. Knowing the limitations of self-knowledge discloses the imperfection of human knowledge of the self and of the world.

As examined in previous chapters, De Quincey sees in human imperfection the opportunity for achieving real perfection, which admits human flaws and engages in the devotion of effort to the task of conquering imperfections. De Quincey's reading of murders admits the limit of human perception, and such a limit is rooted in the human inability to comprehend and imagine the idea of infinity, which lies beyond the



spectrum of time and space. The human mind works within the range of a beginning point and an ending point; however, sublime moments are already outside the realm of the human temporal scale. It is not about when, it is about how—about the functioning of the human ability to comprehend and narrate the perception of time. De Quincey's reading also endorses the strength of the human will in achieving higher goals. The subject is not utterly defeated when brought to the verge of his subjectivity; on the contrary, a will to overcome is generated. Kant sees such experience as a negative pleasure, which is not a playful enjoyment but serious and profound. It symbolises the quest for improvement; not the improvement of the world but an internalised of the self. Thus, when ethics is submerged by aesthetics and when time is suspended and replaced with no-time, what follows is a stronger will to amelioration.

De Quincey writes about murder and the dark psychology both in *On Knocking at the Gate in Macbeth* and *On Murder*; in both works, moments of suspension are needed to create an artistic distance from the real world of brutality and therefore enable the spectators to enjoy unpleasant experiences with a necessary artistic taste. Murder is a good example. Providing an explosion in human feelings, a murder which is considered as fine art by De Quincey helps its spectators to escape from the present world and to venture into another world. Escape is the keyword; it suggests the existence of more than one world and points out the differences between the visible and dominant world and the invisible but valuable one. De Quincey urges his readers to welcome the suspension from the ordinary world: “[i]n order that a new world may step in, this world must for a time disappear.” (*KGM*, 6) The temporary suspension of the ordinary world aims at making new experiences accessible, in which aesthetic thrills are not hindered by earthly morality. Emerged in these aesthetic feelings, the spectators are freed and relieved from the symbolic world of rational constraints. In the world of the aesthetic, time does not assert its dominance.

Murder, unlike other forms of art, cannot be judged simply and De Quincey's account directs us away, as usual, from moral perspectives: murder "must be insulated—cut off by an immeasurable gulph from the ordinary tide and succession of human affairs" (*KGM*, 10) to be aesthetically understood. De Quincey advises his readers to take a stance distant from the world of routine in order to make aesthetic judgements:

...we must be made sensible that the world of ordinary life is suddenly arrested—laid asleep—tranced—racked into a dread armistice: time must be annihilated; relation to things without abolished; and all must pass self-withdrawn into a deep syncope and suspension of earthly passion. (*KGM*, 6)

This is the extension of the "sympathy of understanding", the ability to dispense with any prejudice and presupposition. By dispensing with usual standpoints, readers are able to experience step by step the suspension from ordinary life, the surreal world of creation, and the feeling of freedom before resuming the ongoing business of ordinary human life.

The suspended sense of current time is a key to experience what De Quincey calls the sublime moment. Such sublime moments have been unhooked from clock time if the premise of experiencing them is to suspend calendar time; in De Quincey's theory, the sublime moments are subjective perceptive moments infused with the revelatory power of the self. Though these sublime moments have real existences in the historical clock time when the events happened, the experience and the perception of these sublime moments are purely through sympathetic understanding of the spectators. In the *Confessions*, De Quincey introduces a similar moment. De Quincey describes the worlds of celestial pleasure as well as demonic pain. Very often paralysed by his addiction and an ambiguous sense of guilt, De Quincey is convinced that the opium addiction, though morally refutable, triggers the sensory extremity

which leads (via opium) to the world of theatrical dreams and calls “into sunny light the faces of long-buried beauties, and the blessed household countenances, cleansed from the ‘dishonours of the grave’”; soothes the “wounds that will never heal” and brings to guilty man “the hopes of his youth” (*COE*, 49). Opium, the panacea of all, brings to him the grotesque dreams, the extension of imaginations, and the knowledge of the mind. A new world is illuminated by opium and is waiting for him to explore.

## **Chapter Four:**

### **Virginia Woolf's Interpretation of Time**

Time and self are inseparable. After the rise of Romantic subjectivities, the traditional view of time as part of God's grand picture is replaced by a more private set of relations. Though the year is still dated according to the alleged birth of Jesus, a personal perception of time gradually begins to equal or displace a public or clock sense of time. Time is movement and progression; arguably, we see life only in relation to time. It is in time that we grasp the concept of the past, present and future, and it is also in time that we see a beginning and an end. We also see memory and hope in the light of time. The differentiation between God-like time and temporal activities of men allows a separation between natural time and personal time. These two outlooks on time do not progress at the same pace; the asynchronised pace is at odds with the subjective sense of time that develops in the Romantic period. By the turn of the twentieth century, this disjunction between subjective and clock time becomes even more pronounced and is foregrounded throughout the modernist writing of Woolf, Joyce, Wyndham Lewis, Lawrence, Eliot and Pound.

These competing models of temporality frame De Quincey's perceptions of the external world and his inner reflection upon the nature and experience of selfhood. Intrigued by the multiple perception of time and his self-absorbing preoccupation with human psychology, De Quincey's questioning nature pushes him to analyse certain self-revelatory moments in life. Compared to earlier Romantic models, Woolf's own sense of loss is more of a modern urban existence, which appears to be composed of ceaseless changes and the bombardment of the nerves and senses. Walter Pater summarises these societal changes when he writes: "To regard all things and

principles of things as inconstant modes or fashions has more and more become the tendency of modern thought.” (Pater, 150) The force of modern changes of pace is far-reaching: “it rusts iron and ripens corn.” (Pater, 150) If it is accepted that the Romantics attempted to come to terms with the experience of time brought on by the early pressures of modernisation with its erosion of pastoral rhythms and the gradual falling away of religious belief, Woolf expresses an experience of time that is much more directly phenomenological. Woolf embraces modernisation, or put differently, modernity seizes her, in almost a bodily manner and kinaesthetic fashion: Orlando owns a car, Shel pursues a flying career and the couple jump emblematically into a taxi at the end of *A Room of One's Own*. Simultaneously, as modernity captures Woolf with its enhanced speed of movement, there is a sense of an uncertain feeling of loss and nostalgia in Woolf when the past is left behind so quickly as never before. Woolf, too, has her own asynchronic moments. In her writings, a harmonious feeling of time is replaced by a seemingly chaotic modern narrative of modern day life, in which philosophical quest, aesthetic inheritance, and an experience of gender confusion contribute to the overall effect.

“It is time,” said Rezia in *Mrs. Dalloway* to unveil the theme of the mysterious time.

The word ‘time’ split its husk; poured its riches over him; and from his lips fell like shells, like shavings from a plane, without his making them, hard, white, imperishable words, and flew to attach themselves to their places in an ode to Time; an immortal ode to Time.<sup>107</sup>

Woolf and other modern individuals experience themselves submerged within the powerful flow of time and, like Septimus, lack the means to enter into a definitive relation with time. With the Paterian bombardment of modern life, time becomes more than an invisible or background experience, but a fully realised bodily

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<sup>107</sup> Virginia Woolf, *Mrs. Dalloway* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 59. Hereafter cited with abbreviation, *MD*.

experience of speed and movement which propels the thinking self. It is when time flows by that one understands time; before words can be put together to describe the modernist experience of time, the moment has vanished. In Woolf's works, time is always presented in forms that memorise the past as if it is only after time has stroked the skin and touched the mind that one can register cognitively its existence. Whereas, arguably, her Romantic predecessors thought and responded to the question of time with a focus on the posthumous and on the sense of futurity, Woolf deals in her works with a different feeling of loss and a more overt nostalgia. In other words, while the Romantics looked forward as much as they glanced backwards, Woolf deals with moments already lost. As odes to time often *Mrs. Dalloway* and *To the Lighthouse* embody the working of the past, memories, and the experiences translated into the form of art; it is an important focus of Woolf's entire writerly career. As much as Woolf believes it is the critic's duty to tell modern literature which direction novels are going (GR, 11), her eyes constantly "gaze steadily into the past" (11) and her writings consist of a variety of memoirs, biographies, reviews as well as descriptions of significant moments in the past. With this in mind, this chapter investigates how Woolf shapes her modernist novels as an elegiac tribute to the past.

### The Nature of Reality

A major focus in Woolf's literary theory is her rejection of Edwardian Realism. The underlying difference in belief is the definition of what reality means, and what is the true picture of life. As Whitworth suggests, "The essence of Woolf's argument is that if we free ourselves from the tyranny of fictional convention, and attend to the actual 'impressions', we can see that modern life does not follow the patterns employed by

realistic writers.”<sup>108</sup> In the same way as we speak of De Quincey’s literature of power, “impression” is not a factual recording, but the projection of the factual world in human minds. Woolf is against rigid descriptions of characters, the shallow scope of neat plots and, above all, a fixation on the linearity of storytelling. Life, in an impressionist’s manner, is not the opposite of reality, but the projection of reality onto the screen of every individual mind. Such an idea is not a disjuncture from Romantic conceptions, and Woolf also takes up the Wordsworthian legacy of using the real language of ‘men’ to tell their own story. Woolf’s criticism of the Edwardian neglect of human psychology represents a different quest to their aesthetic pursuit; whereas the Edwardians take reality to be life as the accumulation of facts, Woolf asserts the importance of individual interpretation and questions the legitimacy of time’s dominance and shaping of our understanding of reality. Where should reality reside is asked in *A Room of One’s Own*: “What is meant by ‘reality’? It would seem to be something very erratic, very undependable—now to be found in a dusty road, now in a scrap of newspaper in the street, now a daffodil in the sun.” (*AROO*, 143) This uncertainty about the nature of reality is at the centre of Woolf’s disagreement with the Victorians. Reality, the narrator of *A Room of One’s Own* says:

It lights up a group in a room and stamps some casual saying. It overwhelms one walking home beneath the stars and makes the silent world more real than the world of speech—and then there it is again in an omnibus in the uproar of Piccadilly. Sometimes, too, it seems to dwell in shapes too far away for us to discern what their nature is. But whatever it touches, it fixes and makes permanent. That is what remains over when the skin of the day has been cast into the hedge; that is what is left of past time and of our loves and hates. (*AROO*, 143-144)

Reality’s power in fixing and making permanent things is an ambiguously attractive idea for many writers. Fixing or making permanent things is at the same time both

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<sup>108</sup> Michael Whitworth, *Virginia Woolf* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 118.

enticing and dangerous. Woolf is drawn to the idea of giving life an immortal existence through remembering and writing, but she is also aware of the danger of reifying and rigidifying life which ought to be floating and in constant change. If we look more closely at Woolf's idea of life, it is obvious that she perceives life to exist in two domains—an outer and factual one and an internal opening of mental life—on which she invests her focus.

However, the stability of the two faces of life is not made fixed and concrete. Rather than naming a condition, Woolf realises the sense of movement of the inner life in contrast to the external facts of Realism; Woolf rather perceives a discrepancy between the movement of the external and the internal. The two faces of one's life do not share the same pace or the same rhythm. Therefore, from Woolf's point of view as a writer, the natural focus falls on the character within history rather than on history followed by characters. In "Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown", Woolf raises the question in response to Bennett: "He says that it is only if the characters are real that the novel has any chance of surviving. Otherwise it must die. But, I ask myself, what is reality? And who are the judges of reality?" (*CBD*, 98) Consistent with Woolf's aesthetic view, she wants to "create characters which seem real, not only to Mr. Bennett, but to the world at large?" (*CDB*, 98) In Woolf's aesthetics, there is an urge to create a character like Mrs. Brown—a unique yet timeless character, representing common humanity that should appeal to all and takes only a brushstroke, a momentary but insightful verbal encapsulation and depiction of character.

Her criticism of Edwardian Realism could be understood from another aspect; the superficiality of the Realism that Woolf is strongly against is in fact a reckless surrender to the dominating power of linearity. In her writings, Woolf attempts to look at life itself instead of looking "very powerfully, searchingly, and sympathetically out of the window; at factories, at Utopias" (*CDB*, 103) and this stance involves her



understanding of time. In the understanding of time, the two different outlooks between a historical one and a personal one come into focus; Woolf

engages with the question of whether reality exists independently of human perception, and the related question of whether clock time or psychological time is the more real. She inquires into the nature of the self: whether an individual's sense of self is a fixed quality, or something endlessly variable according to their environmental and social context. (Whitworth, 109)

The sense of reality is understood by Woolf as the interaction of time with an individual's cognitive experience. Human understandings of reality follow our perception of time. Whitworth observes that Woolf's sense of time has a direct influence on her knowledge of the self, and the interlinked philosophical questions about subjectivity and art are manifested in Woolf's writings. If a writer wanted her work to stand for longevity, the question to be asked is what appeals to a wider audience through a shared humanity. This is when psychological time takes precedence over clock time; time may change, but humanity spreads even wider.

An overthrow of the supremacy of external reality results in a different interpretation of what reality is on an individual level, and this leads to Woolf's experimental fiction, "The Mark on the Wall",<sup>109</sup> in which Woolf overlooks the factual report of reality and shows more favour over individual imagination and meditation. When "Everything's moving, falling, slipping, vanishing" (*HH*, 83) and when "There is a vast upheaval of matter" (*HH*, 83), the nature of reality is stumbling. Looking at the mark on the wall and being immersed in her own thoughts, the narrator says: "I feel that I have grasped a plank in the sea; I feel a satisfying sense of reality which at once turns the two Archbishops and the Lord High Chancellor to the shadows of shades." (*HH*, 82) The narrator ruminates around the mark on the wall and

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<sup>109</sup> Virginia Woolf, "The Mark on the Wall" in *A Haunted House: The Complete Shorter Fiction* (London: Vintage, 2003). Hereafter cited with abbreviation, *HH*.

strays into various reveries and meditations. The intricate thought process reflects Woolf's reluctance to pin down the nature of reality and truth. Literature has always been about opening up possibilities. In "The Mark on the Wall", one's internal thoughts and consciousness are highlighted against a background of external objects; Woolf creates a space where the external world represents contingent instability and the narrator finds an anchor point to be grounded within a personal interpretation when it comes to defining reality. Woolf's emphasis on how personal speculation should define a phenomenon in the external world makes the novella less a story and more of "an essay on the nature of reality, in which are weighed the values of impersonal, non-human reality, of social reality, and of imaginative reality." (Whitworth, 119)

The narrator of "The Mark on the Wall" loses her sense of clock time until awakened by the interruption of her partner. Before the re-introduction of clock time, the narrator creates a loop of personal elaboration straying away from the ticking of clock time and venturing into a perceptive and imaginative world without its influence. The understanding of reality cannot be separated from human perception, and human perception is tied to our feelings of time. Put differently, human perception exists in history, whether it is an external and social one or internal and personal. *To the Lighthouse* depicts the issue of two modes of thinking in relation to time and "asks whether Mr. Ramsay's way of thinking, systematic and linear, is more real and reliable than Lily's artistic way of thinking." (Whitworth, 116) However, the better comparison would be the ways of thinking between Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay.

Mr. Ramsay's philosophical approach deals with "Subject and object and the nature of reality" as James describes it, but as Whitworth suggests, "Philosophers attempted to reconcile the subjective and the objective elements of reality by arguing that language filters our perceptions" (117). This dependence on language and logic,

rather than on creativity and intuition, hinders the advancement of Mr. Ramsay's philosophical investigation:

It was a splendid mind. For if thought is like the keyboard of a piano, divided into so many notes, or like the alphabet is ranged in twenty-six letters all in order, then his splendid mind had no sort of difficulty in running over those letters one by one, firmly and accurately, until it had reached, say, the letter Q. He reached Q....But after Q? What comes next? After Q there are a number of letters the last of which is scarcely visible to mortal eyes, but glimmers red in the distance. Z is only reached once by one man in a generation. Still, if he could reach R it would be something. Here at least was Q. He dug his heels in at Q. Q he was sure of. Q he could demonstrate. If Q then is Q—R—Here he knocked his pipe out, with two or three resonant taps on the handle of the urn, and proceeded. "Then R ..." He braced himself. He clenched himself. (*TTL*, 30-31)

Unable to picture what "is scarcely visible to mortal eyes", Mr. Ramsay's logical thinking of reality is countered by Mrs. Ramsay's intuitive and submerged way of thinking these feelings.

Unable to follow "the ugly academic jargon, that rattled itself off so glibly" (*TTL*, 14), Mrs. Ramsay always has "the whole of the other sex under her protection" (*TTL*, 9). Often feeling "she was nothing but a sponge sopped full of human emotions" (*TTL*, 29), Mrs. Ramsay lived her life through feelings. When Mr. Ramsay linearly progresses in a logical way, Mrs. Ramsay's feeling takes her back to the past and into the future. Time exists in the pondering of her mind: "What was the reason, Mrs. Ramsay wondered, ...diving, through her own past, some deep, some buried, some quite speechless feeling that one had for one's mother at Rose's age....And Rose would grow up; and Rose would suffer, she supposed, with these deep feelings" (*TTL*, 67). Mrs. Ramsay's feelings form her sense of time, and memories are what make the past the past and the present the present. Instead of being occupied by the idea of progression and advancement, Mrs. Ramsay is best consoled through her intuition of a

harmony in things, where

there is a coherence in things, a stability; something, she meant, is immune from change, and shines out...in the face of the flowing, the fleeting, the spectral, like a ruby; so that again tonight she had the feeling she had had once today already, of peace, of rest. Of such moments, she thought, the thing is made that remains for ever after. This would remain. (*TTL*, 85)

Making the transient into a permanent harmony gives Mrs. Ramsay an anchored feeling of achievement and her projection of reality gives her a kind of equilibrium, a feeling of balance between the transient and the permanent.

Depicted as a stern and intellectual figure, Mr. Ramsay takes pride in metaphysical and philosophical quests and achievements. But what he does not realise at the same time is his dependence on his family and especially his wife. The sight of his family “fortified him and satisfied him and consecrated his effort to arrive at a perfectly clear understanding of the problem which now engaged the energies of his splendid mind.” (*TTL*, 30) As much as Mr. Ramsay would like to think he is the leader of the family, like the leader of an expedition, he is an “egoistic man” who constantly “plunged and smote, demanding sympathy” (*TTL*, 34) from his wife. However, at the same time, Mrs. Ramsay’s sense of time which relies on her feelings is balanced and adjusted by Mr. Ramsay in the same way. Not knowing what she wanted, Mrs. Ramsay sat next to her husband and joined his reading. “They had nothing to say, but something seemed, nevertheless, to go from him to her, It was the life, it was the power of it” (*TTL*, 97); the feeling is satisfying and restful for her and “her mind felt swept, felt clean.” (*TTL*, 98)

The dependence is mutual, but the comparison determining which approach to reality is more fruitful seems to be unfruitful itself. Woolf’s attempt is to present “their intimacy, for they were drawing together, involuntarily, coming side by side, quite close”. This inseparable relation between a materialist and psychological

understanding of time is best embodied by the inseparability of the relationship between the very contrasting yet compatible Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay.

### Between Historical and Personal

Though two modes of thinking are juxtaposed in *To the Lighthouse*, Woolf admits the two modes interact and overlap. There are times when social reality permeates into the forming of personal reality; in *Mrs. Dalloway*, Septimus felt “there were moments when civilisation... seemed dear to him as a personal possession; moments of pride in England; in butlers; chow dogs; girls in their security.” (47) Some moments in life harmoniously merge with the external world. In *Mrs. Dalloway*, Woolf depicts such a balance:

Life itself, every moment of it, every drop of it, here, this instant, now, in the sun, in Regent’s Park, was enough. Too much indeed. A whole lifetime was too short to bring out, now that one had acquired the power, the full flavour; to extract every ounce of pleasure, every shade of meaning; which both were so much more solid than they used to be, so much less personal. (67)

The peaceful synchrony when external reality and personal time become two sides of the same thing could be explained as part of Woolf’s moments of being. However, more often, Woolf wants to deliver her idea that reality is more constituted through the multi-perspectival. In *Orlando*, the concept of reality is fundamentally challenged by Woolf’s whimsical description of an unconventional personal history that has a beginning too ancient to trace and a future too unstable to predict. In contrast to the evolving history of the British Empire, Orlando’s personal time follows her own rhythm instead of obeying the reign of clock time. For Woolf adopts a different approach in *Orlando* and has her protagonist liberated from the dominance of clock time; as a rebellious gesture or as a whimsical joke, the narrator says in *Orlando* that:

“it is a difficult business—this time-keeping.” (*OL*, 291) From Woolf’s and the narrator’s point of view, time-keeping is secondary to the artistic completeness of their work.

As a biographical subject, ironically, Orlando does not seem to be affected by time, and ageing is never an issue in the novel. Orlando lives from the reign of Queen Elizabeth I until, as the novel indicates, the present moment in the 1920s, but she remains at the age of thirty-six throughout. In each different era, expectations of the society somehow change Orlando, making him embody and fulfill the ‘spirit of the age’, which, in each case, is self-consciously flaunted and parodied by Woolf. The life span covers hundreds of years, breaking the limits of human expectations. Orlando’s life is there for readers to reconsider what we know about the concept of ‘time’, because “[t]he true length of a person’s life, whatever the *Dictionary of National Biography* may say, is always a matter of dispute.” (291) Other than the concept of time, Orlando’s longevity also mocks the shortsightedness of fragmented historical time because as a symbol of humanity and art, Orlando’s existence is immortal and always expanding. Though the spirit of the age may differ from era to era, the nature of Orlando does not. Hence, while the relevance of time is an obvious point, Woolf’s emphasis on the core of humanity remains the same if we remember her criticism of Realism as being too caught up with external facts and missing an insightful, penetrating, eye with which to see beneath the superficial surface.

Set against hundreds of years of factual British history, Orlando’s personal perception of time resists being synchronised with clock time. For those “most successful practitioners of the art of life” who can synchronise every strike of the clock with their human system and make “the rest chime in unison”, “the present is neither a violent disruption nor completely forgotten in the past” (291); but for Orlando, the present is a relative term because she belongs to the group who “are not yet born though

they go through the forms of life” or “are hundreds of years old though they call themselves thirty-six.” (291) If clock time is an arbitrary concept, Woolf shows that personal time could be and should be idiosyncratic and invested with every individual’s own perceptions and experience of life without having to conform to any historical-temporal concept. Living a life that does not follow the usual scale of human mortality, Orlando’s sense of time depends much on how Orlando perceives it: time could be “of prodigious length. Yet even so, it went like a flash” (96), or it could be “stretched longest and moments welled biggest and he seemed to wander alone in a desert of vast eternity.” (96) No scale is right and accurate for Orlando’s perceived time, and it is with this perceived time that Woolf builds her argument creatively. As in De Quincey’s opium-induced temporal sense, the length of perceived time varies too much to be defined in simple terms.

Though Orlando lives through centuries of time, Woolf wants Orlando’s life to be independent of the measurement of days and years. It should be measured by the inner rhythm of her mind, which brings subjective meaning. Therefore, the narrator of *Orlando* suggests that we suspend our curiosity concerning Orlando’s life if we cannot understand the “discrepancy between time on the clock and time in the mind” (95) and see that “Of the two forces which alternately, and what is more confusing still, at the same moment, dominate our unfortunate numbskulls—brevity and diuturnity—Orlando was sometimes under the influence of the elephant-footed deity, then of the gnat-winged fly.” (96) Woolf’s experiments with Orlando liberate the Western philosophical tradition of the subject from its thralldom to the kingdom of God in order to embrace the creative and self-generated time experience of modern individuality. As McIntire suggests, in connection with the experimental biography of *Orlando*, Woolf ironically “challenges the artificiality of confining a lifetime to its calendrical span” and criticises “the Western cultural fallacy that consciousness is

reducible to a discernible singularity framed neatly by diachronic time.”<sup>110</sup>

### Women’s Time

Orlando undergoes a gender change in the middle of the story and continues her unconventional life as a woman. Woolf’s tactic of bringing sex changes and an unusual time scale into the story is more than a light-hearted digression from her experimental writings. Rachel Bowlby suggests in *Feminist Destinations* that Woolf’s sense of time should not be expected to be linear, because linearity defines an end-directed movement often associated with patriarchal attitudes and institutions.<sup>111</sup> Bowlby feels that Woolf’s time, a female sense of time, should be circular. The concept of a female sense of time poses challenges to the traditional patriarchal point of view.

Julia Kristeva proposes in “Women’s Time” a narrative alternative to the traditional time consciousness. Kristeva’s argument points out the absence of a female sense of time; she says “Father’s time, mother’s species” and suggests that when “evoking the name and destiny of women, one thinks more of the *space* generating and forming the human species than of *time*, of becoming history.”<sup>112</sup> As discussed before, the sense of reality is always related to historicity; women in this instance do not have their reality because women do not have their history—not the measurement of time nor the language of communication. As Woolf says about Clarissa from Peter Welsh’s point of view, “women live much more in the past than we do, he thought. They attach themselves to places; and their fathers — a woman’s always proud of her father” (47); history-making seems to be the business of men and women are attached

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<sup>110</sup> Gabrielle McIntire, *Modernism, Memory, and Desire: T. S. Eliot and Virginia Woolf* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2008), 127.

<sup>111</sup> Rachel Bowlby, *Feminist Destinations and Further Essays on Virginia Woolf* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1988), 75.

<sup>112</sup> Julia Kristeva, “Women’s Time”, Alice Jardin and Harry Blake trans. *Signs*, Vol. 7 (1981), 15.



to the life of the past and interiority and the spatial realm. Kristeva points out the abundance of female connotation in space-related ideas since Plato: “the *chora*, matrix space, nourishing, unnameable” (16). However, the dissociation of time and history in the case of women results in a total lack of identity and narrative integrity.

In “Women’s Time”, Kristeva suggests that masculine time is linear, logical, and prospective with a purpose; it also has a beginning and an end and whatever is in between is presented in disjointed fragments. However, women’s time is eternal, repetitive, immortal and continuous, due to women’s uneventful and repetitive social upbringing and domestic lives. This creates a different value of life for women. Kristeva argues that the spatial focus in the female point of view is problematic and makes women’s time cyclical. In other words, the idea of linearity is replaced by trivial but significant moments for women. What Kristeva does not but should elaborate on is that time and eternity are almost two contradictory concepts, because in eternity, no beginning and end are suggested and thus the sense of time is only ambiguous and even irrelevant. Without time, the disappearing of history is just inevitable:

...female subjectivity as it gives itself up to intuition becomes a problem with respect to a certain conception of time: time as project, teleology, linear and prospective unfolding; time as departure, progression, and arrival—in other words, the time is history. (17)

A similar problem is discussed in *A Room of One’s Own*—the omission of history and the establishment of a woman’s voice: “if I could not grasp the truth about W (as for brevity’s sake I had come to call her) in the past, why bother about W in the future? It seemed pure waste of time to consult all those gentlemen... One might as well leave their books unopened.” (39) Woolf’s solution to women’s lack of history is to embrace such moments in life and to devote her writing to it; furthermore, Woolf also tries to address this problem in her literary feminism.

For artistic reasons, it is crucial to depict what she calls those “moments” in life because Woolf is convinced that they represent the depth of mental and emotional activities of human beings. Time has an even closer relation to identity for women. Women need time to create their history and these moments need to be connected to make a history with a supporting past and a prospective future. Woolf wants women to have money and a room in order to sit down and write. However, on a more pragmatic level, time symbolises and equates to freedom. Writing itself takes time and it is difficult for women to have a break from their duties to invest in their personal investment. With no identity and no freedom, Clarissa thought to herself on the way home from the flower shop that:

Much rather would she have been one of those people like Richard who did things for themselves, whereas, she thought, waiting to cross, half the time she did things not simply, not for themselves; but to make people think this or that; perfect idiocy she knew... for no one was ever for a second taken in. (9)

Personal time is a rarity for women; it is almost as important as money and a room.

For Mary Carmichael, in *A Room of One's Own*, is not a genius as a writer, but if she were given “those desirable things, time, money and idleness” (123), we are told “She will write a better book one of those days. She will be a poet.” (123) Under the oppression of patriarchal time, Woolf encourages writing to create and occupy women’s time that contributes to a new narrative of independence and autonomy.

### Time and Mind

Between worldly clock time and personal time, Woolf prefers to look into those drifting human perceptions because this is where individuality and identity manifest themselves, whether masculine or feminine. The psychological side of understanding time requires a subjective approach. In “The Mark on the Wall”, the narrator says

“How readily our thoughts swarm upon a new object, lifting it a little way, as ants carry a blade of straw so feverishly, and then leave it...” (77); the narrator drifts with her thoughts and projections of the world, but is barely influenced by the physical world at all. “In order to fix a date it is necessary to remember what one saw” (77); time is determined not by the calendar but by human memory and perception in Woolf’s story. Such a focus on the internal world of perception reflects many aesthetic arguments of Woolf which criticise Realism, and it is also a response to the emergent discipline of psychology. Woolf’s adaptation of William James’s “stream-of-thoughts” is presented in “The Mark on the Wall” and behind this discussion of the flowing consciousness resides Woolf’s outlook on time.

“Stream-of-thoughts” is a psychological term used to describe the constant flow of human consciousness and recognise subjectivism in personal time. William James’s psychological understanding of the mind-world interaction is more organic than mechanic; James invests in understanding truth from personal interpretation and believes truth is dependent on how people apply it.<sup>113</sup> His psychological discourse widely permeates modern literature, and the concept of stream-of-consciousness is well-developed in *Mrs. Dalloway*. In *Mrs. Dalloway*, Woolf’s interpretation of reality leans much towards the internal vision of the characters. However, set against metropolitan London, the participation of the external world is indispensable. Big Ben, taxis, aeroplanes and even people in the park all contribute to the picture of what reality is like. Though the picture is formed in the mind, it is not only receptive but also projective.

Though it might seem that there is only one factual world what actually constitutes everyone’s sense reality is for each individual to decode. Mrs. Dalloway is

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<sup>113</sup> William James, “Pragmatism’s Conception of Truth” in *Pragmatism: A New Name for Some Old Ways of Thinking* (New York: Longman Green and Co, 1907), 76-91.

preoccupied with the idea of ‘making it all up’, in which case decoding is encoding. One’s perceptions constitute as well as construe the “real”. In that sense it is hard to say what is a “fact” and what is the “factual world”. As the aeroplane flying above London creating letters from smoke trails leaves the scene, each onlooker has a different opinion as to what they have witnessed: “out fluttered behind it a thick ruffled bar of white smoke which curled and wreathed upon the sky in letters. But what letters?...a K, and E, a Y perhaps?” (17) The aeroplane creates an urban spectacle and everyone watches and completes the scene with their various interpretations. The thoughts of Septimus flow as the aeroplane flies over above him: “thought Septimus, looking up, they are signalling to me. Not in actual words; that is, he could not read the language yet; but it was plain enough, this beauty, this exquisite beauty....Tears ran down his cheeks.” (18-19) Septimus feels that only he among the crowd of people experiences an illuminated moment; this message is special and personal. In Septimus’s understanding of reality, language, as a tool of logic, matters no more. Septimus’s internal feeling and emotional response to the event take precedence in determining what reality is to him.

A less saturated factual background is Woolf’s appraisal of the internal reality of the characters represented in the loosening of the time structure. “The Hours” was the original name of *Mrs. Dalloway*, yet Woolf changes the title and makes time a subtle underlying fluid subject of the novel and an integral part of its defining form. Susan Dick observes that Woolf’s “design involves moving the characters through the streets of London while also timing their movements in a way that will create the impression of disparate events occurring simultaneously.” (Roe and Sellers 2004, 51) Time is the subtle theme; it is only against the passing of time that these characters find their rhythm of life. Big Ben has always been in the background, but when did Clarissa wait to cross Victoria Street and what time did the party end does not matter

as much as those happened within each character. Woolf wants to “give life and death, sanity and insanity” (*WD*, 56) to the story.

However, starting the day with Mrs. Dalloway going out to buy flowers, Woolf finds it impossible to offer a story that leads directly to the party in the evening without taking the winding paths through the minds of each character:

I always forget some most important intervening scenes: I think I can go straight at the grand party and so end; forgetting Septimus, which is a very intense and ticklish business, and jumping Peter Walsh eating his dinner, which may be some obstacle too. (Diary, 64)

These intervening fragments in the story are perfectly webbed together as Woolf attempts to write the “most complicated, spirited, solid piece, knitting together everything.” (65) In other words, in the story, external time and internal time are both presented in order to provide a balanced distribution of social and personal time. The formal design of the story enables “continual shifts from an omniscient perspective to one tied to a particular character, shifts that often take us from ‘actual time’ into ‘mind time’, two modes which are not, as our own experience tells us, measured on the same scale.” (Dick, 53)

Big Ben is the reminder of historical time in *Mrs. Dalloway*; the time measured by the clock is ceaselessly moving and audibly present. Yet, the time of Big Ben is undifferentiating: “First a warning, musical; then the hour, irrevocable.” (4) Every strike of Big Ben is a clock hour pronounced; together with various shared public sights, the sound of Big Ben serves as a connection between the individual states of consciousness of the characters; it is macrocosmic. However, the actual time has never been identified and the story is not dissected into chapters according to the original design of depicting the hours in a day; the microcosmic worlds of every individual are also respected. Having the clock time as a present but vague background, Woolf preserves the microcosmic picture of the story and puts her

emphasis on the characters' experiences of time to bring out the contrasting differences between time measured by the clock and time lived within the mind.

The narrative of the story alternates among the characters, jumping from one consciousness to another; and each character's life is filled with their own understanding of time as embodied in particular moments. Watching the traffic in London,

Septimus looked. Boys on bicycles sprang off. Traffic accumulated. And there the motor car stood, with drawn blinds, and upon them a curious pattern like a tree, Septimus thought, and this gradual drawing together of everything to on centre before his eyes, as if some horror had come almost to the surface and was about to burst into flames, terrified him.  
(13)

But the world is projected differently in Clarissa's mind as she thought "how moments like this are buds on the tree of life, flowers of darkness they are... (as if some lovely rose had blossomed for her eyes only)" (25). London in Woolf's eyes is a mechanical apparatus, operating as a big machine that sustains everyone's life; but it is no longer inspirational as nature was for the Romantic poets because reality is now shattered and overwhelmed by individual perception. Septimus's experiences in the war destroyed his sense of the outer world and kept him locked in his traumatic experiences. The connection between individuals and the world has become nervous and off-balance. After the city witnesses the chaotic traffic, even the question of who was in the car falls into dispute: "the face itself had been seen only once by three people for a few seconds. Even the sex was now in dispute." (14) The outer reality governed by the sound and sight of London becomes dependent upon a perceptual understanding of it. Echoing her own statement that literature should turn towards the world of human psychology, Woolf does not wish to underestimate the importance of the mind in comparison to that of the mechanical world.

In *Mrs. Dalloway*, by overlaying the voice of the character with that of the

narrator and moving imperceptibly between them in a doubling of voices, Woolf's use of free indirect discourse makes the internal world visibly presented. Woolf tries to ask the question of who and what should dictate (and determine) time if the authority of Big Ben is challenged by different mental perceptions and experiences of time.

More blatantly, Woolf's question is explained in her own words:

Time... though it makes animals and vegetables bloom and fade with amazing punctuality, has no such simple effect upon the mind of man. The mind of man, moreover, works with equal strangeness upon the body of time. An hour, once it lodges in the queer element of the human spirit, may be stretched to fifty or a hundred times its clock length; on the other hand, an hour may be accurately represented on the timepiece of the mind by one second. This extraordinary discrepancy between time on the clock and time in the mind is less known than it should be and deserves fuller investigation. (*Orlando*, 94)

Woolf's awareness of time and how consciousness perceives time is apparent; her awareness of time is two-fold: "both as an impersonal force and as a personal experience, as shared time and individual time, as the regulated and measurable time of clock, public and private, and of seasons and stars." (Briggs, 125) But it is Woolf's duty and ambition to combine these two senses into one as we experience life, as her free indirect discourse melds these two times into one experience for the reader.

Proposing her scheme of time, Woolf, like De Quincey, is highly sensitive to how the human mind perceives time. In De Quincey's opium confessions, time could be both stretched and condensed. Woolf and De Quincey are intrigued by the apparatus of the human mind before further pursuing philosophical question about the nature of time.

### The Bergsonian Time

Henri Bergson in *Time and Free Will* proposes that clock time dominates the narrative of the nature of time; therefore it is crucial to distinguish between clock time and

psychological time. Using the classic paradox of Achilles and the tortoise, Bergson points out the common human misunderstanding of time. The misconception of time lies in the habit of introducing the idea of space into the description of time: “When we speak of something happening ‘at’ a certain time, we are imagining times as if they were places. We are ‘spatializing’ time” (Whitworth, 121). Thus the flowing nature of time as we experience it is distorted and disjointed by our intellectual approach of understanding. Bergson suggests that we misunderstand a single event, with its existence and physicality, as time: “It is in space, therefore, that the operation takes place”.<sup>114</sup> Events are accumulations in space. However, like the striking of Big Ben in *Mrs. Dalloway*, it takes events to identify time, though an event itself is not time. Bergson argues that psychological time is more truthful to the flowing nature of time.

Psychological time does not belong to the “phenomenal world, which, we are told, is a world cut out for scientific knowledge, all the relations which cannot be translated into simultaneity, i.e. into space” and thus is categorised as “scientifically unknowable” (234). Bergson theorises the scientifically unknowable and calls it “duration”. Bergson’s philosophy understands the essence of life as endless creation, a free vitality; nothing stays still and neither does time. Bergson’s world is different from the traditional approach which uses intellectual understanding to understand and generalise the world; his approach is psychological and continuous. He explains traditional philosophy with the metaphor of cinematographic mechanism, indicating how traditional rationalism captures slices of the world in the same way as a camera captures fragments of the world. Therefore, even though the frames taken by cameras could be stitched together into a designated period of time to make it more life-like and be replayed at a speed similar to the actual happening in the real world, it is still a

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<sup>114</sup> Henri Bergson, *Time and Free Will* (New York: Dover Publications, 2001), 87.



hallucinatory copy of the actual world instead of a truthful representation of the constantly moving world.

Bergson argues that intellect could understand time in an abstract form, but not enough to comprehend the nature of time.<sup>115</sup> The frames of the world rely on a spatial concept and such understanding gives a misleading conception of time. For Bergson, time does not consist of fragments; time is duration. It is floating, continuous and heterogeneous because the world does not stop evolving: “real duration is made up of moments inside one another, and that when it seems to assume the form of a homogeneous whole, it is because it gets expressed in space.” (*Time and Free Will*, 232) Rational intellect helps to understand time measured by clock, the mathematical and spatialised time; whereas intuition is the only way to comprehend the duration of time. The intuitive understanding of duration responds to William James’s theory of stream-of-consciousness, in which the past, the present and the future are not separated fragments but a continuous entity.

Bergson’s idea of a personal time was taken up by Woolf, because his idea endorses “a private consciousness which was free of the constraints and conventions of a mechanized, regimented mass society.” (Whitworth, 121) The world view involving the idea of liberating the individual from the dominance of scientific reality is expressed through Clarissa: “She knew nothing; no language, no history; she scarcely read a book now, except memoirs in bed; and yet to her it was absolutely absorbing; all this; the cabs passing; and she would not say of Peter, she would not say of herself, I am this, I am that.” (7) Unlike Mr. Ramsay in *To the Lighthouse*, the knowledge of time, the self and the world does not depend on symbolism but on the intuitive perception of every individual.

Woolf’s treatment of time, though it shares the same understanding of the

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<sup>115</sup> Henri Bergson, *Creative Evolution* (New York: Dover Publications, 1998).

discrepancy between clock time and mind time, takes a different approach from Bergson's philosophical deductions. Bergson's philosophy recognises the evolving of time and rejects the spatialised interpretation of it; however, as a novelist, what Woolf does to capture the sense of duration is to introduce space into her narrative. Different from Bergson, Woolf does not want time to just flow away. Mary Ann Gillies argues in *Henri Bergson and British Modernism* that Woolf attempts to convey pure moments of the Bergsonian duration in her own creation of "moments of being".<sup>116</sup> "Make of the moment something permanent" (133) as Lily Briscoe tries to accomplish, Woolf attempts to do the same in *Mrs. Dalloway*. These moments are transient and revelatory, carrying an ineffable meaning about the truth of life:

Only for a moment; but it was enough. It was a sudden revelation, a tinge like a blush which one tried to check and then, as it spread, one yielded to its expansion, and rushed to the farthest verge and there quivered and felt the world come closer, swollen with some astonishing significance, some pressure of rapture, which split its thin skin and gushed and poured with an extraordinary alleviation over the cracks and sores! Then, for that moment, she had seen an illumination; a match burning in a crocus; an inner meaning almost expressed. But the close withdrew; the hard softened. (27)

These moments in Woolf's novel often are mystical and are regarded as modern epiphanies. In "Sketch of the Past", she famously elaborates on her idea of these moments. She shares Bergson's idea that the human experience of time is not fragments but duration; however, there are moments where she feels life is wrapped in a "nondescript cotton wool" of "non-being" and "moments of being", in which life is lived, experienced, perceived and registered in her consciousness. (MB, 83-84) Therefore, Woolf investigates these particular moments and tries to make them permanent in the form of writing. From Bergson's point of view, Woolf's writing is

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<sup>116</sup> Mary Ann Gillies, *Henri Bergson and British Modernism* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queens University Press, 1996), 109.

exactly an act of spatialising time and depriving time of its continuous floating status quo; yet, Woolf's investment sheds new light on the knowing of self. In *Mrs.*

*Dalloway*, Clarissa grasps a revelatory image of herself in one of the moments she lives through:

Each still remained almost whole, and, as if to catch the falling drop, Clarissa (crossing to the dressing-table) plunged into the very heart of the moment, transfixed it, there — the moment of this June morning on which was the pressure of all the other mornings, seeing the glass, the dressing-table, and all the bottles afresh, collecting the whole of her at one point (as she looked into the glass), seeing the delicate pink face of the woman who was that very night to give a party; of Clarissa Dalloway; of herself. (31)

Such moments of profound experience, in which disparate thoughts and feelings become meaningful under a sudden insight into life, are moments of epiphany. The idea of epiphany is widely incorporated into modernist writings; in Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* (1899), in James Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916), as well as in *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925) and *To the Lighthouse* (1927) and many others, the secular adaptation of epiphany is often used by modernist writers to describe a deep realisation of truth of the self in relation to the world in a fragmented flash of time. Epiphany is a recurrent idea in Woolf's novels. Woolf's novels depend on "moments of being" to shape and form her themes, because Woolf's "moments of being" encompass various incursions into time and place and become the foundation of future memories.

### Moments of Being

The states of being and non-being in Woolf's novels and autobiographical works remind us of Bergson's philosophy. Like her contemporaries, Woolf is convinced that in response to modernity, the way we perceive subjectivity is different; the fast pace

of life emphasises the unstable nature of modern society. According to his differentiation of fragment and duration, Bergson believes the new form of human subjectivity combines an intellectual self and an intuitive one: “our perceptions, sensations, emotions and ideas occur under two aspects: the one clear and precise, but impersonal; the other confused, ever changing, and inexpressible.” (129) From his understanding of time, Bergson suggests two forms of self—the intellectual one that responds to clock time and the intuitive one that lives in duration. Woolf in her novels also examines the hidden and private self that one could only glimpse in the fleeting segment of duration. Clarissa sees a less pronounced self in the revelatory moment under the often “pointed; dark-like; definite” and imperceptible contracted self:

That was her self when some effort, some call on her to be her self, drew the parts together, she alone knew how different, how incompatible and composed so for the world only into one centre, one diamond, one woman who sat in her drawing-room... had tried to be the same always, never showing a sign of all the other sides of her — faults, jealousies, vanities, suspicions... (32)

The less obvious sides of the self, the “shattered parts”, are diffused in life; Woolf recognises the coexistence of the masking self and other parts with an obvious emphasis on the less contracted and therefore ignored aspects of one’s self.

Like Bergson, Woolf acknowledges the two states of being; however, as a writer, Woolf is deprived of the abstract debates of philosophy and cannot help but fall into the defect of using language to capture the self. To capture the self, Bergson says, “a vigorous effort of analysis is necessary, which will isolate the fluid inner states from their image, first refracted, then solidified in homogeneous space.” (129)

Communicating her ideas through language, Woolf thinks writing is what makes these moments real and makes the experience a complete whole. (*Moments of Being*, 85) Woolf’s sense of achievement as well as pleasure as a writer comes from “discovering what belongs to what; making a scene come right; making a character

come together” (85) in writing. Woolf’s understanding of these moments is influenced by the pervasive psychoanalytic point of view in the early twentieth century. Sharing the same preoccupation with “a search into the self”<sup>117</sup>, modernism and psychoanalysis have a reflexive relationship. Given that Bloomsbury was the pioneering group introducing psychoanalysis into British society and that the Hogarth Press published Freud’s *The Interpretation of Dreams* and many other works, Woolf’s own literary style might be seen to correspond to Freud’s later phase of development—linking “instinct” and “representation” through “language and society particularly through the medium of identification” (Meisel, 96) with an emphasis on the unconscious dimension of the human mind.

Like Clarissa, Woolf gathers her “shattered parts” of the self in her autobiographical moments. Woolf’s very early infant memory was of a moment of pure ecstasy: “It is of lying half asleep, half awake, in bed in the nursery at St. Ives. It is of hearing the waves breaking, one, two, one, two, behind a yellow blind... It is of lying and hearing this splash and seeing this light, and feeling.” (78) Moments like this one are the foundation of her knowledge of the self in relation to the world, a primal experience of the self: “If life has a base that it stands upon, if it is a bowl that one fills and fills and fills—then my bowl no doubt stands upon this memory” (78). These primal moments “were scaffolding in the background; were the invisible and silent part of my life as a child” (86), shaping Woolf’s philosophy of life and art as a writer—“one’s life is not confined to one’s body and what one says or does; one is living all the time in relation to certain background rods or conceptions. Mine is that there is a pattern hid behind the cotton wool.” (85-86)

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<sup>117</sup> Perry Meisel, *The Literary Freud* (London: Routledge, 2007), 96.

### Art and the Past

While “moments of being” have revelatory importance, Woolf does not seem to be biased towards seeing these moments as the only essence of life. These moments lead Woolf to see behind the daily cotton wool an underlying coexisting web of supporting patterns. She says in *Moments of Being* that “A great part of every day is not lived consciously” but “the things one does not remember are as important; perhaps they are more important” (*MB*, 84, 83). Life is divided into conscious being and unconscious non-being, and “The real novelist can somehow convey both sorts of being.” (*MB*, 84)

However, what is crucial is that writing is retrospective, and so is psychoanalysis; they both deal with the past. From Woolf’s point of view as a writer, these moments of being are the synonyms of past memories and the importance of these moments are two-sided for Woolf. First of all, these moments are remembered because they are manifestations of intense perception: “things we have felt with great intensity have an existence independent of our minds” (*MB*, 81); secondly, in writing, it becomes significant for Woolf to transform its nature of being a past event into a becoming present happening because for Woolf those moments “can still be more real than the present moment.” (*MB*, 80) Woolf expresses a strong attachment to these past memories: “I see it—the past—as an avenue lying behind; a long ribbon of scenes, emotions... Instead of remembering here a scene and there a sound, I shall fit a plug into the wall; and listen in to the past.” (*MB*, 81)

Woolf’s emphasis on revisiting and writing the past as memories reflects a personal fixation with her autobiographical history; what she sees in those moments of revelation are keys to her own past and her knowledge of herself. Woolf is always aware of the passing of time and feels powerless seeing things disappear and people

decease; *To the Lighthouse* is a tribute to her own family history presented as an allegory of time. The novel is dedicated to retrieving her family summer holidays at St. Ives, and the memory of the thirteen summers lingers and stays with Woolf in the following years and finally creeps its way into her writing. On the date *Mrs. Dalloway* was published, Woolf wrote in her diary that: "I'm now all on the strain with desire to stop journalism and get on to *To the Lighthouse*. This is going to be fairly short: to have father's character done complete in it; & mothers; St. Ives; & childhood; & all the usual things I try to put in—life, death, etc." (WD, 75) The characters in *To the Lighthouse* greatly resemble Woolf's parents, sibling and family friends; among all, the triangular relationship between Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay and their son, James, as well as that between them and Lily Briscoe representing Woolf's own relationship with her parents as a child in the early childhood and as a grown female writer. While James embodies the childhood projection of Woolf and experiences the ineffable frustrations in the difficult relationship with the parents, Lily represents Woolf as an artist trying to reconcile and repair the relationship through art.

Lily's picture of Mrs. Ramsay and James was completed with a last stroke after envisioning Mr. Ramsay landing on the rock that supports the lighthouse; this is her work accomplished as a writer, but also as a psychoanalyst. The importance of revisiting the past is conveyed in "Sketch of the Past"; she writes: "I suppose that I did for myself what psycho-analysts do for their patients. I expressed some very long felt and deeply felt emotion." (MB, 93) By connecting herself to the past which for her is the origin of all later experiences and putting "the severed parts together" (MB, 85) in her writing, she empowers herself to "live our lives through from the start" (MB, 81). While Big Ben and its world of rigidity marches on mercilessly, the nostalgia towards a slow moving tranquillity is also apparent when what surrounds Woolf is a sense of the transience of every aspect of life. The sense of the past becomes the same

as the sense of what has been lost. Therefore, as Briggs suggests, “Woolf’s central concern has always been with lives in time, and how best to represent time, since its steady falling away endlessly recreated the experience of absence and loss, in a range of shapes and at a variety of levels.” (3-4)

Psychoanalysis is a tool, a tunnelling tool that rejoins the present with the past and formulates logical causal relationship between now and then. In other words, psychoanalysis for Woolf is a time machine which travels in the Bergsonian duration between singled out points. The juxtaposition of the past and present is crucial in Woolf’s writings. “The past is always a felt absence” (3), Briggs says, “even when memory summons threads and strands of it back again.” (3) The meaning of present moments relies much on the past; the past cannot be an absence, otherwise the present would be a detached occurrence of no history or prospect. To preserve the past and make what seems absence a presence, Woolf tries to break the temporal segregation of each spot of time. As previously discussed, with the help of Roger Fry and post-impressionism, spatial conception and visual description are adopted in Woolf’s novels to create room for thought and feelings as well as each strike of Big Ben: all can be represented simultaneously.

Woolf’s art, like Lily’s, is not about likeness. She boldly experiments with the possibility of completeness, as she observes in the essay on De Quincey’s “Impassioned Prose”. What is this completeness, this stillness? Woolf’s proposition is ambitious. She wants to open up possibilities to increase the capacity of novels; “She must try to get hold of something that evaded her. It evaded her when she thought of Mrs. Ramsay; it evaded her now when she thought of her picture...what she wished to get hold of was that very jar on the nerves, the thing itself before it has been made anything.” (*TTL*, 158) Lily’s painting of Mrs. Ramsay is finished with a stroke, but it has not been a simple journey. Woolf’s obsession with the past is not a feeling of



nostalgia; what attracts her is the enigmatic nature of it. The lost past is presented in various forms, “expressing itself spatially and historically as gaps or chasms, and textually as silences” (Briggs, 2), or as an “awkward space” (*TTL*, 70) on her canvas. Lily thought of moving “the tree further in the middle” so that she can avoid the space that has been puzzling her (*TTL*, 70), but the space remains blurry and unclear when she returns after ten years. The unknown between Lily and her painting is like the bay separating her from the lighthouse. The passage is dreadful and odd; Woolf writes: “It was an odd road to be walking, this of painting. Out and out one went, further and further, until at last one seemed to be on a narrow plank, perfect alone, over the sea.” (*TTL*, 141) Woolf knows what is in the sea; that is what has been haunting her and that is the answer: it is the past, the pool of memory and feelings. In the sparkle moment of revelation, she seems to find “a drop of silver in which one dipped and illuminated the darkness of the past.” (*TTL*, 141) When the rest of them crossed the bay to reach the lighthouse, Lily struggles her way into the dreadful passage to the revelations of her past.

As this chapter argues, Woolf shows a tangled relationship with the past. The past stands in for multiple meanings in experience. It is the past in a social and historical sense, the past from a literary point of view, and it is also the past of her personal emotional attachment to her earlier memories. As a modernist writer, she is always eager to write about the spirit of her time—London taxis and aeroplanes, is impatient to separate herself from previous novelists—Edwardian Realism, and is keen to move on with her life away from the invisible dominance of her parents. It is impossible for Woolf though not to dig into the past and have a clear view of it in order to know where she stands now and its foundations. The past needs to be understood, analysed and perhaps dismantled.

The section of “Time Passes” is the tunnel that demonstrates the passing of time

as well as a path leading back to what seems lost. In her diary, Woolf says that as the most abstract part of the novel, “Time Passes” was the most difficult one to write: “I have to give an empty house, no people’s characters, the passage of time, all eyeless and featureless with nothing to cling to.” (*WD*, 87) Woolf makes the section her “lyrical portions” (*WD*, 98) of the novel, and gives time the most abstract and artistic touch. With no human activities, time flows with very little intrusion. The moments of being which expend the spatial dimension of time are absent in this section, leaving “Time Passes” to be read as a long narrow tube filled with emptiness and only suitable to convey one from a place to another. Until the resumption of human activities, time is presented in the Bergsonian duration with no significant moments available for memory. Deserted as “Time Passes” may seem, it is a route that marks the formation of memory. “So much depends”, Lily thought, “upon distance” (*TTL*, 156); the separation between Lily and the deceased Mrs. Ramsay gives her the distance she needs to imagine what Mrs. Ramsay is like when she is “not in grey; nor so still, nor so young, nor so peaceful.” (*TTL*, 145) Lily needs to see Mrs. Ramsay as Mrs. Ramsay sees herself, a wedge-shaped core of darkness.

The world is “a pool of thought, a deep basin of reality” (*TTL*, 147), which is “All about life, about death; about Mrs. Ramsay” (*TTL*, 146). After the section of “Time Passes”, Woolf reveals the two drastic sides of time; time is both destructive and healing. It is only after time has created a distance, that Lily is able to see Mrs. Ramsay in a different light. Illusions are replaced by reality, and Mrs. Ramsay is no longer a size too large, the consequences of De Quincey’s meditative power on his character. Lily felt “now she could stand up to Mrs. Ramsay—a tribute to the astonishing power that Mrs. Ramsay had over one” (*TTL*, 144). When she realised “nothing stays; all changes; but not words, not paint” (*TTL*, 147) then Lily understands that she “had perfect control of herself—Oh yes!—in every other way.”

(*TTL*, 147)

Pater argues that in a modern society, everyone is caught up in a perpetual “weaving and unweaving of ourselves” (152); under such constant and instant impacts, “Not the fruit of experience, but experience itself, is the end.” (Pater, 152) Pater’s argument sounds similar to that of Woolf. “Nothing stays; all changes” sums up Woolf’s perception of the modern world very well; the transient nature of time sweeps things into the past in no time. There is no time to notice that the present has become the past; “The urgency of the moment always missed its mark. Words fluttered sideways and struck the object inches too low.” (*TTL*, 146) Very little time is left to understand, to narrate, or to arrange the past. However, when Pater proposes that “art comes to you proposing frankly to give nothing but the highest quality to your moments as they pass, and simply for those moments’ sake” (Pater, 153), Woolf finds it hard to neglect and forget what is now the past but was the present a second ago. She always bears the past in mind. It would of course be pre-emptive to say that the sole focus of Woolf’s writing is devoted to the past, but even to grasp the present is closely related to the past, either in a retrospective way, or that memories of the past are so involved in our perceptual framing of the present, the world and the self. Hopefully, when nothing remains, words and paint still provide their service: human art is there to make the transient permanent, the past part of the present.

## **Chapter Five:**

### **Representing the Self in the Ambiguous Genre of Autobiography**

#### **and De Quincey's Writings**

Writing extensive essays, criticism, and life-writings, De Quincey had an enormously productive career. However, De Quincey's writings have always been regarded as fragmentary and dispersed and for this reason, critics find it difficult to conduct a systematic study of De Quincey's writings that might lead to a constructive conclusion. However, as fragmentary and dispersed as De Quincey's writings may seem to be, a recurrent emphasis on the self pervades De Quincey's aesthetic discussion of the literature of power and his philosophical reflections on the nature of time. There is a duality in De Quincey's treatment of the self: on one hand, this focus on the self holds his writings together and, on the other hand, this philosophical sense of self results in the indeterminacy of his work. The duality of De Quincey's textual self is the focus of this chapter. Identifying the self as the focal point of De Quincey's writings, this chapter examines the inseparable relation between De Quincey's literary performance of subjectivity and the on-going debate over the nature of the self.

A large proportion of De Quincey's writing is autobiographical and tackles the subject of the self from various perspectives. De Quincey's autobiographical writings and their representation of the self are where his thinking about the transcendental power of literature and the temporality of mortal existence merge together. The form of autobiography is in itself an ambiguous genre and has led to much inconclusive critical debate about what constitutes the genre. However, an important claim of this chapter is to suggest that the ambiguous nature of autobiography is related to the difficulty of representing a self or notions of subjectivity with evidence drawn from

De Quincey's own autobiographical writing, where the ambiguity and the freedom of prose mirror De Quincey's journey of imaginative discovery and creation of the knowledge of his self. Investigating one of the ultimate questions of being human—"What is the self?"—De Quincey engages in a literary exploration that involves both an unravelling and a representation of the self. This chapter examines how De Quincey realises his aesthetic which instantiates and investigates time as it is enfolded into the practice of self-writing. By means of reading De Quincey's criticism and autobiographical writings, this chapter argues that De Quincey discovers as well as creates the consciousness of the self through the medium of language and the practice of writing. This practice anticipates the modernist practices of writing the self.

Though Romanticism is a term used in different contexts with varying definitions, there is an agreed sense that the movement recognised an emergent literary subjectivity. This focus designates an inward turn of Romantic poetry, which is famously avowed by Wordsworth. Inheriting the meditative practice of much of the eighteenth century writing, Wordsworth picks up Milton's lines at the end of *Paradise Lost* as the beginning of his autobiographical poem, *The Prelude*. Wordsworth took "The road lies plain before me" (Wordsworth 2008, 392) and walked into the world opened by the fall of mankind described in *Paradise Lost*:

They, looking back, all the eastern side beheld  
Of Paradise, so late their happy seat,  
Waved over by that flaming brand; the gate  
With dreadful faces thronged, and fiery arms.  
Some natural tears they dropt, but wiped them soon:  
The world was all before them, where to choose  
Their places if rest, and Providence their guide.  
They, hand in hand, with wandering steps and slow,

Through Eden took their solitary way.<sup>118</sup>

The old world resides in the past and a new one opens before Wordsworth and his chosen poetic theme. Narrowing the focus from the grand relationship between the immortal God and mortal being, Wordsworth walks into the world of man, into “the story of my life” (667). Wordsworth’s *The Prelude* is among the greatest autobiographical works written during the Romantic period. The mortal poet, “I”, takes the reader along with him to experience his journey and the growth of his mind. By sharing his experiences with readers, the poet seeks understanding and sympathy while educating his readers about the inner growth of a maturing mind.

Many critics have observed De Quincey’s uneasy relationship between his peer poets. As a matter of fact, De Quincey continuously seeks to revive the legitimacy of the genre of prose. From an aesthetic point of view, De Quincey’s insistence on the literature of power highlights the ideal function and purpose of literature, which is indiscriminately delivered in poetry and prose writing. De Quincey’s idea that prose is capable of delivering Romantic poetics is practiced in his own autobiographical writings. For editorial reasons, De Quincey’s writings have proven difficult to retrieve and assess systematically and, in part, this has led to an undervaluation of De Quincey’s prose writing in a Romantic age largely identified with poets and poetry. Annette Wheeler Cafarelli rightly observes that the “modern tendency to see poetry as the main expression of British Romanticism has eclipsed De Quincey’s reputation, and the absence of a reliable modern edition has generally limited critical study.”<sup>119</sup> That said, it is important to note that De Quincey wrote with the same ideal of writing

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<sup>118</sup> John Milton, *Paradise Lost*, prefixed by Elijan Fenton and criticism by Samuel Johnson (London: John Bumpus, Holborn-bars, 1821), 384. Digitised by Google:

<http://books.google.co.uk/books?id=pO4MAAAAYAAJ&printsec=frontcover#v=onepage&q&f=false>

<sup>119</sup> Annette Wheeler Cafarelli, *Prose in the Age of Poets: Romanticism and Biographical Narrative from Johnson to De Quincey* (Philadelphia: University of Philadelphia Press, 1990), 152.

as his peer poets, which aimed at creating a sympathetic literature of power. Therefore, the difficulty of reading De Quincey alongside his fellow Romantic poets resides not only in his poetical prose, but more in the ambiguous nature of the autobiographical genre of his writing. De Quincey's famous essays are autobiographical; however, it would be pre-emptive to classify his essays strictly within the genre of autobiography. Sharing "the perceptual and narrative concerns of Romantic poetry and criticism" in the same way as his peer poets, De Quincey eludes categorical definition for his "fragmented, digressive, ahistorical" (Cafarelli, 152) modes of writing. As such De Quincey's autobiographical writings make the attempt to answer any questions concerning authenticity of the autobiographical a circuitous journey.

### The Ambiguous Genre of Autobiography

Before discussing how De Quincey's fragmented self-writing reflects his indeterminate understanding of the self, it is important to acknowledge current critical theories about the debate on the genre of autobiography, many of which circle around and respond to Paul de Man. In 1984, de Man's famous essay "Autobiography as De-Facement" points to the impossibility of defining and treating autobiography as a literary genre among others. De Man's theory notes the inextricable difficulty of the genre due to its subject matter. De Man explains that autobiography should not be viewed as a genre because "By making autobiography into a genre, one elevates it above the literary status of mere reportage, chronicle, or memoir and gives it a place, albeit a modest one, among the canonical hierarchies of the major literary genres."<sup>120</sup> De Man argues that "the concept of genre designates an aesthetic as well as a historical function"; he suggests treating autobiography as a specific literary genre

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<sup>120</sup> Paul de Man, "Autobiography as De-Facement", *MLN*, Vol. 94 (1979): 919.

risks “the distance that shelters the author of autobiography from his experience but the possible convergence of aesthetics and of history.” (919) From de Man’s point of view, there is an unspoken uncertainty about the literary value of autobiography, questioning its capacity to address aesthetic values and historical truths at the same time. However autobiography as a site of representing the self, a focus of this chapter later, also exists, for De Quincey, as an interstice for literary value as well as historical temporality.

De Man suggests that autobiographical writing always appears to be “disreputable and self-indulgent” (919). De Man’s reading emphasises the self-absorbed attributes of autobiography; though it is almost an inevitable aspect of the nature of autobiography, this stops de Man from seeing autobiography as a literary genre rather than a personal impulse of writing. Autobiography is judged by its content, or more often by the intention of the author and not by its form. Following de Man’s understanding of autobiography, the ambiguity of genre definition actually liberates autobiography and helps it to elude expected rigidity and decorum. De Man points out the unusual supremacy of the author in autobiographies, which are inevitably written from a subjective perspective. Therefore, even when autobiographies contain fantasies, dreams, and reveries as does any fiction, the credibility of the work remains unquestionable because “these deviations from reality remain rooted in a single subject whose identity is defined by the uncontested readability of his proper name.” (920)

Aside from this status bestowed on autobiographers, the aesthetic differences between autobiographies and fictions is blurred. With this unique relation between the autobiographer and the autobiography flagged up, de Man bravely suggests “any book with a readable title-page is, to some extent, autobiographical.” (922) De Man’s deconstructive study of autobiography neglects the differences between genres and



focuses on the content of the work. Therefore, presented in the form of Romantic poetry, Wordsworth's *The Prelude* is an autobiography with fictional characters and events which are mirrored as representations of his poetic self. In other words, "what links *The Prelude* with *The Confessions of an English Opium Eater* has little to do with genre per se but quite a bit to do with authorial intention, self-declaration and verisimilitude."<sup>121</sup>

De Man's understanding of autobiography reminds us of the ambiguous relationship between his own life story and his theoretical elaboration of the genre. Though de Man points out the ambiguity of autobiography, he also agrees any book could be autobiographical. Thus, in the same way, his autobiographical theory inescapably is an implicit form of autobiographical writing. De Man's deconstructive view intends to separate the author from the literary self in autobiographical writings, because a complete and truthful representation is deemed impossible for reasons relating to subjective selection in the process of writing as well as endless possibilities of self-interpretation. De Man believes that the more one attempts to engage oneself in self writing, the farther away the literary self is from the real subject. Therefore, paradoxically before the nature of "the real subject" could be discussed and determined, de Man's deconstructive stance questions the ultimate authenticity of autobiography while admitting the existence of authors behind every work.

De Man's theory points out the innate ambiguity of the genre as well as the room it opens up for manipulation whether in practice or theory; this is something evident in De Quincey's autobiographical writing and will be discussed later. It is, though, important to see that writing always inevitably involves the presence of a writing subject. To denounce the writing subject can only imply the recognition of its

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<sup>121</sup> "Introduction" in *Mortal Pages, Literary Lives: Studies in Nineteenth-Century Autobiography*, ed. Vincent Newey and Philip Shaw (Aldershot: Scolar Press, 1996), 7.

existence. In de Man's own writing, his denial of autobiographical writings reflects his denial perhaps of his own past. After de Man's death in 1983, a posthumous discovery of his wartime writings brought de Man's deconstructive critical methods into highly conflicted debate. De Man's anti-Semitic articles published in the Belgian newspaper *Le Soir* during the war reveal an unwelcome past which he had never acknowledged; the distance between de Man's later life in America and his previous life in Europe was greatly increased by his silence over his own past. The de-faced past is left obscured and the self remains fragmented and incomplete. Hence, de Man's effort in denying his personal history only ironically draws him even closer to his writings and sheds a new light on the reading and interpretation of his deconstructive rejection of autobiographical writing. As Séan Burke points out, de Man tries to empty the author and eliminate the biographical subject entirely: "an author's personality and life history disappear irretrievably in the textual machine."<sup>122</sup> De Man's theory disassociates the author and the autobiography; and the more explanation devoted to their connection, the further the literary self is from the writing self. Juxtaposing De Man's life and his theory, what becomes apparent is the undeniable association between his literary theory of emphasising the written self and his own life story of trying to segregate the present self from an earlier past. By dissolving the historical fact, in de Man's own formulation of the collision of art and history, the artistic side is highly elevated without necessarily having to recognise the death of the author.

De Quincey's autobiographical writing displays similar manipulation of the ambiguous relationship between the writing self and the written textual self through artistic method, with an even stronger will injected into writing and the creating of the

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<sup>122</sup> Séan Burke, *The Death and Return of the Author: Criticism and Subjectivity in Barthes, Foucault and Derrida* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1993), 2.

self. De Man's focus on the written self is fundamentally a revolt against the "bio" side of the writing, but not on the "-graphy"—the aspect of artistic writing. De Quincey has the same emphasis on the written self with, like de Man, an unrecognised denial of the factual and historical self. In a published letter responding to public uncertainty about the authenticity of the *Confessions*, De Quincey reassures his readers that "the entire Confessions were designed to convey a narrative of my own experience as an Opium-eater, drawn up with entire simplicity and fidelity to the fact".<sup>123</sup> Though De Quincey spoke of reporting fact, biographical evidence only shows that De Quincey never abstained from eating opium as he promised his readers; on the other hand, his creative self in the *Confessions* amounts to an imagined self that exists only in his hopes for the future. De Quincey takes the fictional self as his true self and whether it is done purposefully or not, the creative side of literature is absorbed into shaping this identity of the self. In other words, art and self are two sides of the same coin in De Quincey's writings.

#### A Contractual Agreement

De Quincey's dependence on the freedom of interpretation that literature enables him to shape the self extends further into his relationship with readers. From De Quincey's writing, autobiography seems to have a greater subjective impetus above others, and this makes the "self-indulgent" side of it even more pronounced. Julian North elaborates on De Quincey's self-indulgence with the acknowledgment of De Quincey's opium-eating habit. North observes that "De Quincey's opium indulgence takes centre stage: this is not merely an autobiography which includes examples of self-indulgence, it is an autobiography to which the concept of self-indulgence is

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<sup>123</sup> Thomas De Quincey, *The Works of De Quincey*, Vol. 2, ed. by Grevel Lindop (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2000), 78.

integral.”<sup>124</sup> However, apart from being self-indulgent, it should be noticed that constructing a subjective knowledge through self-interpretation in autobiographical writings would encounter challenges against its possibility after coming into print. For De Quincey, to put his writings to the test of a public is testing one’s fantasy against reality. Public testimony is asking more than indulgence and tolerance. The reality of interpretation determines the possibility of autobiographical writings, when the connotation of autobiographical works demands a certain level of factual credibility. De Quincey’s imagination and factual report needs to find a balance in his writings. Considering the nature of publication, whether a book is successful depends much upon the numbers of books sold.<sup>125</sup> De Quincey becomes a popular writer with the publication of the *Confessions*, and with a broad readership, the invented self is further recognised. As Levin puts it: “De Quincey establishes that his Opium-Eater present a “record,” an “account of events” that one would more naturally keep hidden were they not in their truth and sincerity so “instructive” and of such potential “benefit” to others.” (12) Laura Marcus sees De Quincey’s autobiographical writings as products in the market waiting to be purchased, creating a contractual relationship between the writer and the reader in a commercial sense.<sup>126</sup> Autobiographical writings become a contractual exchange, and the self is up for a market price. The autonomy of the autobiographer is determined by the reception. Under the public eye, Edmund Baxter argues that De Quincey, the victim-like writer, suffered from great anxiety. De Quincey lived “in terror of... misunderstandings” from his readers,

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<sup>124</sup> Julian North, “Autobiography as Self-Indulgence: De Quincey and His Readers” in *Mortal Pages, Literary Lives: Studies in Nineteenth-Century Autobiography*, ed. by Vincent Newey and Philip Shaw (Aldershot: Scholar Press, 1996), 63.

<sup>125</sup> Lucy Newlyn, *Reading, Writing, and Romanticism: The Anxiety of Reception* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 8.

<sup>126</sup> Laura Marcus, *Auto/biographical Discourses: Criticism, Theory, Practice* (Manchester, Manchester University Press, 1994), 35-37.

because the readers do not always “share his perspective and cannot appreciate the difficulties involved.”<sup>127</sup> Even with an underlying fear of failing to convince his readers, the fear is a spur to De Quincey’s autobiographical project; De Quincey revises, elaborates, and enriches, but never refuses his autobiographical writings. Language is his tool and literature his means. It is true that the moment of publication reinforces the contrast between a public force of determination and the self-originated will to interpret; however, such a contrast opens up an unfulfilled gap in the contract always awaiting further interpretation and elaboration and completion.

De Quincey is aware of how important the readers’ acceptance is to him and his project of writing. The writing of the *Confessions* depends heavily on De Quincey’s ability to tolerate his readers and vice versa. In the beginning of the *Confessions*, De Quincey openly pleads of his readers for the acceptance of the rude exposure of his own deeds, deeds not commonly acceptable in English society because: “Nothing, indeed, is more revolting to English feelings, than the spectacle of a human being obtruding on our notice his moral ulcers or scars, and tearing away that ‘decent drapery’, which time, or indulgence to human frailty, may have drawn over them.” (*COE*, 1) Therefore, hidden behind this plea for the need to reveal his personal stories, De Quincey also demands indulgence from his readers—an indulging tolerance for his self-indulgent drug addiction. De Quincey draws his readers into a writing project that centres around his indulgent addiction; for North, “De Quincey’s fascination with indulgence—indulgence of and towards the self—becomes an extended meditation on the nature of the autobiographical pact between author and reader.” (8) In calling for “Courteous, and, I hope, indulgent readers (for all *my* readers must be indulgent ones, or else, I fear, I shall shock them too much to count on their courtesy)” (*COE*, 50), De

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<sup>127</sup> Edmund Baxter, *De Quincey’s Art of Autobiography* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1990), 18.

Quincey reaches a secret and unspoken agreement with his readers. His italicised “*my* readers” is inviting, which suggests *his* readers are selected and intimate and he “restyles the public as his priest...and asks them to grant him remission from punishment.” (North, 64) Unlike de Man’s denial of the past and a lonely game of fighting the unwelcomed past, De Quincey takes a more wilful approach by inviting his selective readers on board to enjoy his journey of multi-layered self-indulgence.

The intimate and tolerant relationship is greatly dependent upon the public reception of opium in English society at the time. As McDonagh points out, “in the 1820s and 1830s most critical discussion of [De Quincey’s] works centred on the medical, psychological, and moral issues raised by opium addiction.”<sup>128</sup> Opium is an important factor and is necessary to the writing of autobiography in De Quincey’s career; as North concludes, “De Quincey’s opium habit is an indulgence of, in and towards the self, and it is only thus that his past selves may be recovered, consolidated, restored to innocence” (64-65) and it is with the indulgence of readers that De Quincey is able to construct a contractual relationship based upon mutual trust.

Therefore, from a contractual point of view, de Man agrees that

Autobiography, then, is not a genre or a mode, but a figure of reading or of understanding that occurs, to some degree, in all texts. The autobiographical moment happens as an alignment between the two subjects involved in the process of reading in which they determine each other by mutual reflexive substitution. (921)

From a deconstructive approach, the generic definition of autobiography becomes a question of a consensual agreement on the perception of and reception between the auto-biographer and the readers. De Man describes this as “the signature that gives the contract legal, though by no means epistemological, authority” (922), and does not guarantee “a subject capable of self-knowledge and understanding.” (922) Readers, in

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<sup>128</sup> Josephine McDonagh, *De Quincey’s Disciplines* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), p. 153.

this agreed relationship, are “the judge, the policing power in charge of verifying the *authenticity* of the signature and the consistency of the signer’s behaviour, the extent to which he respects or fails to honor the contractual agreement he has signed.” (923)

The contractual relation between the author and the readers guides us to understand De Quincey’s motivations behind his other para-texts alongside the *Confessions*. In De Quincey’s case, the contractual relation introduces the check-and-balance dimension that entrusts readers with responsibilities of affirming the authenticity of autobiographies as well as explaining De Quincey’s effort not only in writing the *Confessions* but communicating with his readers through public letters and appendices. The readers endorse De Quincey’s writings and they share his responsibilities in authentication of the liability of his autobiography. However, authors are still granted great freedom in, and through, their acts of writing. This freedom of writing has no genre restriction and de Man suggests that the “Writer of autobiographies as well as writers on autobiographies are obsessed by the need to move from cognition to resolution and to action” (922) to obtain the legislating position. Moving from theory to practice implies recognition of the value of literary action and product. Arguably, when the authenticity of autobiography resides in mutual trust between author and readers, writing autobiography could easily escape from being reportage and objective facts to become more creative in a literary sense; a creative work is different from historical report in its nature, thus as long as autobiography serves its purpose to instruct and inspire as De Quincey hopes his *Confessions* will, autobiography could be “less like an effort to write the self, and more like a mode of writing which (sometimes) produces a sense of literary personality.” (Treadwell, 177)

De Man’s counter-intuitive argument distances the author in the very moment when the author’s will is incarnated through literary creation. As in the case of De

Quincey, literary personality becomes less of a problem of representing the self and more one of egotism; the discrepancy between the self and the thinking of the self is represented through autobiographical writings when it is evident that the textual self is “to do with grammar, and therefore with writing, not psychology; it is a problem, about the circulation of texts/selves in the public sphere.” (Treadwell, 65) Such discrepancy may help to explain De Quincey’s dilemma of trying to understand the self through the means that actually create another. Hence, the literary aspect of De Quincey’s autobiography and the textual self that needs to be received as a textually constructed entity are highlighted. This literary emphasis of autobiography further blurs the line between autobiographical reportage and fictional creation. Therefore, in the contractual relationship of De Quincey and his readers, what is proposed is not a self-portrait but a portrait of the self through De Quincey’s eyes and writings, in which both parties have to set aside the demand for truth but pursue the enjoyment of art. As Treadwell concludes, “What De Quincey shows is that the ‘I AM’—the autobiographical assertion of the self’s presence—is a literary event.” (176) Poetry is the most condensed form of literature, but with the most expressive potential of meaning and interpretation; fictions rely on the building of language and plot to create the imagined reality, while prose is the private language of the author with the most intimate revelation of the author. De Quincey’s autobiographical prose encompasses the reasons and emotions of the opium-eater, and as the *Confessions* is accepted by the readers, De Quincey is accepted. The authenticity and veracity of autobiographical writings is side lined to the discipline of history.

### The Art of Confession

The relationship between De Quincey and his readers has its prototype in the tradition



of spiritual confessions. De Quincey's *Confessions* is not only an autobiographical work, it is, as its title suggests, a confessional work as well. Following the Romantic focus of subjectivity, Romantic writers have often placed subjectivity at the centre of their writing and experiment with various narratives of shaping the knowledge of the self. Confessions, as well as autobiographies, letters, and diaries are prevalent. Susan M. Levin observes that confessions create "a form that focuses the problems and processes of writing about the self during the first half of the nineteenth century, an age that established self-writing as an important literary undertaking."<sup>129</sup>

Confession has its religious background and implication, in the traditional sense, in the impulsive act of confession, which in itself is a journey of accounting for one's wrong doings to attain pardon through self-knowledge and an attempt to set out a new personal identity. However, in De Quincey's confessional writing, the religious aspect has faded out and is replaced by the urge to create a textual self under the cover of confessions; as Levin's observation of Romantic writers suggests, "the impulse to state a set of beliefs has shifted to the impulse to write, as the romantic confessor attempts to provide in his or her book a material equivalent of being." (11) The other aspect of the religious tradition of confession is the mutually dependent relationship between the confessor and the listener. To engage in a confessional act, as it is presented in autobiographical writings, the authenticity of truth is determined and agreed between the writer and the reader. Though Levin points out that confessions are "defined by the notion of truthful recounting" (1) and Romantic narrators press the implications of the term "confession" into service to make their discourse appear grounded in lived reality rather than in literary artifice" (12), it is important to see that for Romantic confessors, truth is conditioned: "Confessions are truthful and complete

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<sup>129</sup> Susan M. Levin, *The Romantic Art of Confession: De Quincey, Musset, Sand, Lamb, Hogg, Frémy, Soulié, Janin* (Columbia: Camden House, 1998), 1.

within the stated limits of their titles.” (12)

Levin’s understanding of Romantic confessions helps us to see the manipulative side of De Quincey’s writings. “To tell nothing but the truth—must, in all cases, be an unconditional moral law” (Lindop ed., 78) is how De Quincey describes his autobiographical writings. However, De Quincey also says “to tell the *whole* truth is not equally so” (COE, 78). In De Quincey, the Romantic quest for what the self—the “auto”—replaces the historical side of self writing and an inward outlook takes precedence. Though it cannot be denied that De Quincey’s *Confessions* has its literary ancestors, yet the turn from a religious and redemptive purpose marks the great difference in De Quincey’s contribution to the knowledge of the self. De Quincey is aware of the deconstructive nature of the use of language. A utopian belief in complete truth is deemed impossible in both autobiographies and confessions, because the participation of language in order to create “a material equivalent of being” inevitably involves rhetorical interpretation, which raises the question of the fictionalisation of confessions. As much as De Quincey promised to tell nothing but the truth, the whole truth is denied nonetheless.

As an inevitable, unavoidable and unanswerable question, the level of truthfulness seems to become relative as Levin suggests: “Some would have it that nothing exists without language. A less extreme observation would be that a certain amount of fictionalization must occur as soon as experience becomes rhetoric.” (9) Furthermore, as Paul Jay puts it, the desire to be in the text, which is to use “one medium—language—to represent another medium—being”<sup>130</sup> has outweighed the concern of the level and purity of truthfulness. Based on her observation of the Romantic dependence on language, Levin’s claim about the dependency “on language

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<sup>130</sup> Paul Jay, *Being in the Text: Self-representation from Wordsworth to Roland Barthes* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1984), 21.

to set out a self” and how “Romantic confessors can be seen as engaging in a basic statement about the creative potential of language” (9) is one which De Quincey’s writing could not agree with more.

### De Quincey’s Autobiographical Writings

From the discussions above on the genre of confessional autobiography, an emphasis on the aesthetic side of autobiographical writing becomes apparent in De Quincey’s work. As a writer, not a historian, the literary focus seems inevitable. But it is equally important to understand the subject matter of autobiographical writing, which is responsible for most of the ambiguity of the genre. Following the observation of De Quincey’s inclination towards literature, it is important to look at the thematic focus, which is the nature of the self—the “auto”—in his writings. When De Quincey first published his *Confessions* in *London Magazine* (1822), autobiographical writing had already become a dominant part of Romantic literature. As in Wordsworth’s *The Prelude*, the growth of a poet’s mind, the revelation and educational aspect of self writing is a shared idea. De Quincey considers himself as someone whose life “has been, on the whole, the life of a philosopher (COE, 2)” and with his writings he “shall present the reader with the moral of [his] narrative.” (COE, 4) Bearing the influence of Enlightenment, the term ‘philosopher’ is used widely at the time but in a less restrictive sense than our current usage of the term. During De Quincey’s time, the term “philosopher” was used to identify educated men of letters who are actively engaged in thinking and reasoning rather than a professional discipline. To assert his own ability to engage in profound thinking about his life as an addict, De Quincey trusts to the reader that his *Confessions* “will prove, not merely an interesting record, but, in a considerable degree, useful and instructive.” (COE, 1)

During the age when the concepts of the mind and the sensibility are highly emphasised, it is a usual practice to include private emotions, feeling, meditations, and unique experiences of the author in autobiographical works. “What is life?” is a constantly asked question posed by pre-Romantic and Romantic writers, even if “their responses to that question took the form not of clearly defined answers but instead of testimonies to the difficulty of responding to it.”<sup>131</sup> It is common to regard the presentation of the inner life, where the soul is, as having great significance in autobiographical writings. Nietzsche says, “If we relinquish the soul, ‘the subject,’ the precondition for ‘substance’ in general disappears.” (268) Thus, if the substance of the subject comes from the soul, it is not surprising that De Quincey utilises autobiography as confession as his chosen medium for exploring and presenting his supposed self-knowledge.

De Quincey seldom uses the word “soul” in his writings; whereas he uses “the mind” or “the human brain” to designate his inner self. Though different terms are used to signify the inner and mysterious side of the self, the emphasis on probing into and on interpreting that innately equipped something and the emphasis on regarding the interpretation as a fundamental basis of a self-reflexive knowledge is part of the same process of definition. For De Quincey, determining the mind or the human brain or whatever name it bears becomes the first step in determining the subject. De Quincey’s fascination with the human mind may not be ground breaking, but his indeterminate understanding of the mind implies a process of constant questioning and finding answers. For this exact reason of not yet, or maybe never, arriving at a definite answer to what the self is, De Quincey’s writings appear to be dispersed, fragmented and always meditative. As “the most inward, passionate, and literary of all

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<sup>131</sup> Ross Wilson ed., *The Meaning of “Life” in Romantic Poetry and Poetics* (London: Routledge, 2009), 1.

British romantic autobiographical documents (and so after *The Prelude* the most canonical)” (Treadwell, 170), De Quincey’s *Confessions* “is a fairly short, discontinuous, often anecdotal memoir, very far from the coherent narrative of an unfolding identity which the word ‘autobiography’ has come to denote” (Treadwell, 171) when compared with other autobiographical writings of his peers. It is true that De Quincey’s *Confessions*, *Suspiria*, as well as *The English Mail-Coach* have long been regarded as fragmentary and hard to bring into a single focus. However, Grevel Lindop, De Quincey’s biographer, sees a connecting force behind De Quincey’s seemingly disorganised writing: De Quincey is “reluctant to centre his work on a single point” but prefers “to circle around a cluster of related topics.”<sup>132</sup> His explanation recognises a certain kind of unity in De Quincey’s writings and suggests that it is the kind of unity of “a ring or wreath that has no centre” (xvii). Therefore, De Quincey may use “the mind,” “the brain,” or “the palimpsest,” which embodies his “dreams,” “memories,” “fantasies,” and “meditations” in his writings; his different and seemingly inconsistent terms could be simplified and narrowed down to the inner world and the various activities it presents. The discrepancy between the unified self and a fragmentary one is manifested in De Quincey’s terminology.

However, even though Lindop only recognises the ring or wreath in De Quincey’s writing, this chapter wants to point out that rather than attributing it to De Quincey’s inability to engage in systematic writing, it is important to see further into the nature of his subject—the self. The self is not yet a settled argument, and the debate over its nature is an ongoing one. Therefore, under the surface of a laborious verbosity, which is vague and sometimes incoherent, De Quincey’s writings do have a centre. Although, De Quincey has not yet found the definite term for his focus on the

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<sup>132</sup> Grevel Lindop, *Introduction to Confessions of an English Opium-Eater and Other Writings*, Thomas De Quincey (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), xvii.

inwardness, this occupation is what makes his writings dispersed but salient:

The work's canonical eminence derives instead from its representation of a visionary inwardness, conveyed in bursts of sublime rhetorical intensification and theatrical self-dramatization. Where does this inwardness come from, though? The canonically based view of Romantic autobiography would answer whether it is innate to the author's genius and imagination (a *Biographia*-like reading) or that it grows organically, *Prelude*-style, in the secret chamber of the self. (Treadwell, 171)

The inwardness of De Quincey's autobiographical writings draws on his "genius imagination" and opium to map out "the secret chamber of the self". Put differently, De Quincey's creative rhetorical interpretation of opium leads him to explore the undefined realm of the human mind. In the "Preliminary Confessions", De Quincey claims that his life adventures are to be regarded merely "as furnishing a key to some parts of that tremendous scenery which afterwards peopled the dreams of the Opium-eater" and the true hero of the work is the opium, not the opium-eater, because opium is "the legitimate centre on which the interest revolves." (COE, 78) The interests involved here are not only those of the readers in the fascinating power of opium, but also De Quincey's own interests in the world that opium makes accessible. De Quincey's fragmentary style of writing truthfully reflects a dispersed knowledge of the self. The self has moved from a coherent autonomous unity (in the Enlightenment sense of the word) to having a floating and ever-changing character.

De Quincey regards opium as the hero because he is convinced that opium is the activator of his dreams and visions, in which his true interest lies: "...the primary effects of opium are always, and in the highest degree, to excite and stimulate the system" (COE, 43-44). In De Quincey's terms, dream, reverie, memory, fantasy, and meditation are synonyms of the mind's activities—the system. Although, it is through dream, memory or fantasy that De Quincey comes to observe and grasp the image of the mind, he wants to make sure that the system is not undervalued as mere

imagination. As de Man points out, there is an impatience to put the urge to narrate into writing. If seeing is believing then so, too, are observing and understanding. As Treadwell points out, there are elements of literary creation and invention in De Quincey's self writing—intensification and dramatisation. Highlighting the functional side of literature enforces the idea that self could be produced and shaped through writing. However, by calling the inner world “the system”, De Quincey gives it a real existence more than an imaginative one; such a materialistic view of the mind plays an important part in De Quincey's writing of it. These activities of the system also testify to the actual existence of it; De Quincey's understanding of the mind has transcended the instinctual and imaginative realm that proposes a seemingly materialistic attribute of it. Such understanding drives De Quincey to translate his vague concept of the mind into a solid linguistic form of representation as a replacement of its yet undefined material existence in the anatomy of the human organism.

### De Quincey's Split Self in Writing

When De Quincey calls the mind “the system”, what is implied is the physical comprehension of the mind. In this sense, De Quincey seems to propose a fundamental “being” of the self. In the belief that writing contributes to the self, De Quincey faces the philosophical dilemma of admitting the self as both a being and a product of becoming at the same time. The tension has never been fully resolved in De Quincey's writings, and should never be if the philosophical understanding of the self has not reached a definite answer.

De Quincey expresses his inclination towards literature with regard to his confessional autobiography. In De Quincey's writings, time and historicity, as the

most rigid and reliable measure of the world of reality, often become, a relative idea and one that was secondary to artistic completeness. To emphasise the artistic side of autobiographical writing over its factual elements is to agree with de Man's point that historical aspects collide with aesthetic ones when autobiography is considered as a genre. In the *Confessions*, De Quincey asks his readers to bear with his inaccurate recording of time: "I have not been able to compose the notes for this part of my narrative into any regular and connected shape. I give the notes as disjointed as I find them, or have now drawn them up from memory." (COE, 62) De Quincey shows his reluctance to forsake the integrity of the literary self in pursuit of historical accuracy, because "the subject of impassioned prose transcended historical circumstances" (McDonagh, 156). But what is also evident is that De Quincey does not give the system of the mind in order to honour artistic creation, for what is proposed by De Quincey is to replace the outer system of time and history within the internal workings of mind and memory. With the medium of art, the manipulation of the time order supports De Quincey's attempt to reorganise historical facts—an attempt that only serves (at his pleasure) to create an invented self through the literary imagination.

McDonagh suggests that the collision of the historical and the aesthetic in De Quincey's autobiographical writings "produced a fractured and eccentric body of writing" (156) which in itself includes mixed and complicated themes:

autobiographies that are also drug narratives, that relinquish centre stage to opium, that subside into biography, that obsessively document memories of infancy, that incorporate elaborate dream sequences, and so on. (156)

The dispersed variety of the themes covered in De Quincey's autobiographical writings makes it hard for critics to categorise his writings; McDonagh believes that the fragmented and digressive style of De Quincey's autobiographical writings



“disrupts any semblance of a coherent statement of a rhetorical contract to offer an authentic and stable representation of himself as a unified subject.” (157)

McDonagh’s statement anticipates a coherent and united picture of the self, which is absent in De Quincey’s writing. However, the picture McDonagh has in mind is the unity between the external self and the internal self.

Calling the mind “the system” indicates De Quincey’s inclination to believe in a physical form of the self; as a matter of fact, the battle of public history and personal narrative is no longer an issue; what De Quincey tries to answer is the tension between the physical self and the textual self, which might be either mutually dependent or mutually exclusive. With a dual identity residing within the writing self and the written self, the ongoing comparison of the two selves becomes instructive. In this context, reading De Quincey’s confessional autobiography, Levin suggests that:

De Quincey gets at what Jacques Lacan has described as one of our most basic anxieties: the disjunction between the identifiable, coherent unity we start recognizing in a mirror at an early age and the neurotic, uncontrollable bundle we feel ourselves to be—the reality of the dispersing self as opposed to the fiction of the unified, autobiographical self. (19)

McDonagh and Levin disagree on where De Quincey’s unified self resides, but the discrepancy between the world of given reality and the world of creative art is no doubt obvious.

To advocate the textual self, De Quincey states: “Whenever it could answer my purpose to transplant [the notes] from the natural or chronological order, I have not scrupled to do so.” (*COE*, 62) It is obvious that De Quincey is willing to admit that he does not intend to create a coherent narrative; he endorses the literary aspect of his autobiography and insists on the priority of the psychological effect of it: “Few of the notes, perhaps, were written exactly at the period of time to which they relate; but this can little affect their accuracy; as the impressions were such that they can never fade

from my mind.” (COE, 62) The priority of the literary side is again pronounced in De Quincey’s refusal to follow chronological order and this is easily understood if we recognise De Quincey’s insistence on the legitimacy of his writings. De Quincey’s dependence upon the textual self extends into his use and manipulation of para-texts. When being questioned on the truthfulness of his abjuration of opium after the publication of the *Confessions*, De Quincey takes laborious efforts to explain the legitimacy of his addiction and how readers should not mistake the false impressions they have for reality in a letter dedicated to the reading public: “I left no impression but what I shared myself; and, as may be seen, even this impression was left to be collected from the general tone of the conclusion, and not from any specific words” (Lindop ed., 82). De Quincey is convinced that his words bear a supreme power, and his own self is constituted by what his words denote.

An important strand of McDonagh’s argument is that De Quincey employs opium as the centre of focus in order to bring unity to the *Confessions*; however, as McDonagh also points out, the status of opium is dropped as one of many factors later in *Suspiria* because “this alteration in the status of opium is consistent with a wider shift in the social reputation of the drug.” (159) Therefore, it is reasonable to argue De Quincey only uses opium as a pathway to arrive at the psychological depth of the self and reach the unity of his writing. Thus, in this respect, De Quincey expresses a different emphasis on the self. Relying on the inducing power of opium, what De Quincey found fascinating is neither opium nor the inflicted dreams, but the faculty of ‘my own humour’ as De Quincey refers to it. The purpose of writing is simple and straightforward: “my way of writing is rather to think aloud, and follow my own humour” (COE, 62).

As in language, opium dreams lead to a fractured picture of the self. But De Quincey is yet to decide whether dreams or language take precedence. Though De

Quincey embraces his experiences of revelation in his dreams, of which he says: “the dream[s] are but illustration of this truth, such as every man probably will meet experimentally who passes through similar convulsions of dreaming.” (146) However, Levin suggests that dreams equate to words in the same way of exercising the grand sympathetic power of the mind (37); therefore, what should be more clearly mentioned is that dreams and language are both what De Quincey employs to explore the unknown and unclear world of human psychology.

### The Self is a Subjective Construction

Two different understandings of the self are fundamental to De Quincey’s unresolved fragmented style. De Quincey’s writing style assumes that literature is the creative method to shape the self; however, in his writing, there is a constant sense of unintentionally discovering the self as well. De Quincey’s autobiographical writings manifest the difficult problem of becoming and being, in Nietzsche’s terms. With a blurred differentiation between fiction and autobiography as well as De Quincey’s prioritised emphasis on literature, his autobiography displays a subjective journey of shaping the self. “Everything is subjective” as Nietzsche famously attests in *The Will to Power*.<sup>133</sup> Denying the assumption of the existence of objective reports, Nietzsche considers everything to be interpretations, projection of subjective understandings, rather than facts. Therefore, nothing is truthful reportage, because truth is only relative to subjective positions. Nietzsche’s denial of the ideal belief in total truth helps us to rescue De Quincey from encountering the collision of the historical and the artistic that de Man proposes, since there is no history and everything is a form of art. For Nietzsche, even history is made with interpretation. Therefore, Nietzsche’s

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<sup>133</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power* (New York: Vintage, 1968).

understanding of the subject challenges the ontological nature of the subject which anticipates a pre-knowledge entity; Nietzsche “holds that the Western tradition of the ‘self’ is just that— a constructed tradition” (Jay, 28).

Questioning the pre-existent ontological nature of the subject, Nietzsche emphasises the epistemological understanding of the subject which emerges in the process of becoming through incessant interpretation. Nietzsche insists that the subject is “interpreted from within ourselves, so that the ego counts as a substance, as the cause of all deeds, as a doer” (269). The need to interpret transforms everything into subjective projections, upon which we build an epistemological understanding of the subject and of the world. In other words, everything is a constructed knowledge based on the phenomenological understanding of the self in the world. Nietzsche does not deny the existence of the subject, yet he rejects the idea that there is one dogmatic understanding of the subject. If subjective knowledge is phenomenological, then it is destined not to be stable, given and pre-determined. Nietzsche’s philosophical elaboration of the subject sets free the limit and boundary of self-knowledge and empowers subjective interpretation, which allows the building of self-reflexive knowledge—the knowledge which both discovers and creates the self.

Nietzsche’s idea of self knowledge is one which both creates while it discovers, but also discovers through creating. Such thinking paves the way for de Man’s deconstructive theory. De Man points out that people tend to assume life comes before autobiographical writing, which implies a one-way causal relation between life and autobiography. However, refusing to see the self as a pre-existing being, de Man proposes a reversal of the dynamic relationship between life and autobiography which suggests the creation and inventive side of autobiographical writings in the makings of self:

We assume that life *produces* the autobiography as an act produces its

consequences, but can we not suggest, with equal justice, that the autobiographical project may itself produce and determine the life and that whatever the writer *does* is in fact governed by the technical demands of self-portraiture and thus determined, in all its aspects, by the resources of his medium? (920)

Instead of regarding the subject as a given entity of ontological credibility and that the subject performed in autobiographical writings “represents a privileged form of referentiality” (Jay, 18), the written self is a textual production. In this sense it is justifiable to consider writing as a rhetorical process of constructing and articulating the knowledge of the subject. The making of self is highlighted once again in de Man’s dialectics of autobiography. De Man does not debase the value of the presentation of life experiences, but the debate between a pre-determined subject and one which is built through self-exploring and self-examining is what de Man’s theory sheds light on.

Nietzsche and de Man both inform our reading of De Quincey’s literary focus on writing the self. De Quincey devotes a great amount of effort to describing the mechanism of the mind. Using personal feelings, memories, and experiences as his materials, he never ceases to give the mind different interpretations. Nietzsche says: “No, fact is precisely what there is not, only interpretations” (267), De Quincey, similarly, overthrows the idea of a fixed concept of the subject with his attempt to make various interpretations. For De Quincey, exercising his understanding of the self in writing is how he attains various possible presentations of the subject, which Nietzsche regards as “multiplicity” (270). The question of what is a self equates to the question of what is life and with “an inquiring rather than dogmatic spirit” (Wilson, 1); rather than giving a definite answer, De Quincey’s writing is devoted to providing “an elaborated formulation and reflection” (Wilson, 1).

Before the question of whether the self is not a hidden treasure to be discovered

is asked, De Quincey expresses his belief that the self resides in the process of thinking and writing and always would be a by-product in the process of making and becoming. From De Quincey's understanding of himself, it is not difficult to see that he is convinced that the self could be captured by observing, understanding, and interpreting the mind. Thus, the mind manifests itself in different forms in order to capture every glimpse of understanding. De Quincey also develops different ways to interpret the mind. To construct this sense of subjectivity, writing is his medium to fashion the knowledge of the subject, which is achieved in the rhetorical invention of his autobiographical writings. The self is therefore always in the process of becoming and being invented in De Quincey's writings.

Paradoxically, such an account of this process implies the purpose of becoming is to get to the point of a pre-existing destination of being. This notion of becoming "the self" instead of merely finding a pre-existing self is elucidated by Nietzsche. Being and becoming are two main but inter-related concepts. In Nietzsche's theory, the states of being and becoming are not related in a commonly supposed way. Nietzsche claims that becoming "must not aim at a final stage, does not flow into 'being'." (708) Being as a final state is in question; Nietzsche's challenge to western philosophy is a fundamental one. By questioning the existence of a stable entity as being, what Nietzsche sees is the ongoing process of becoming; he says: "since nothing is, all that was left to the philosophers as their 'world' was the imaginary" (570). Nothing is in the status of "is" in Nietzsche's belief; instead, everything is dynamic. The world of the imaginary is revealing about Nietzsche's world view as well his concept of the self. The self, as the world, is an invention, a residue in the process of becoming. The self is not the final end of the journey, but the by-product of the intention to invent. Alexander Nehamas concludes that "Nietzsche is convinced

that the ego, constructed as a metaphysically abiding subject, is a fiction.”<sup>134</sup> If Freudian psychoanalysis is about revealing the unconscious, then Nietzsche’s theory is about creating the hidden unconscious of the self as merely another fiction.

Revealing the self in the process of writing is closely related to the Romantic notion of autonomy, which questions the existence of a transcendental self. Romantic writers are caught between the concept of a transcendental self and a self that only exists in the moment of narration. The fragility of this transcendental self has been noted:

Is there not a very strong sense that the transcendent self exists, to the extent that it does exist, only in the act of narration? That its claim to infinity—to property without bounds—is dependent on and a priori relation to finitude; to the act of writing as it reveals the presence of thought in the here and now of making.” (Newey and Shaw, 3)

The uncertainty about the credibility of the literary self is almost inevitable when language is involved and its power of creating is allowed, but a pessimistic outlook on writing and creating does not suit De Quincey. Echoing De Quincey’s literary endeavours and enquiry, Woolf, says in her diary: “I thought, driving through Richmond last night, something very profound about the synthesis of my being: how only writing composes it: how nothing makes a whole unless I am writing” (*WD*, 201) As with Woolf, De Quincey’s attempt at pinning down what the self is and where it resides is represented in his constant engagement of writing the self.

### The Fascinating Mind

However much we see in De Quincey’s writing belief in the power of literature, there is always a constant attention to the mind, the system, as De Quincey’s writing is

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<sup>134</sup> Alexander Nehamas, *Nietzsche: Life as Literature* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1985), 176.

generated by the drive to understand the ineffable mind. As much as De Quincey is devoted to writing, his fascination for the unseen inner world is just as prevalent. In fact, De Quincey's interest in the human mind existed much earlier than his encounter with opium. Dating back to 1818, if not earlier, De Quincey had already had the habit of keeping notes of his dreams, intending to put these notes to future literary purposes (Lindop 1985, 249). McDonagh points to De Quincey's fascination with childhood memories as "a frantic search for some originary event around which his subsequent experiences might be organized and comprehended." (157) While De Quincey believes in creating the self through writing, there is no doubt that literature also serves the purpose of discovering and probing, simultaneously, the depths of memory.

Focusing on the mind and trying to come to terms with it is always the preoccupation of De Quincey's writings, and dreams are the starting point of his investigation. In the *Confessions*, De Quincey reports several of his opium dreams. Dreams recorded in the *Confessions* do not necessarily have coherent manifest dream contents, and neither does De Quincey try to relate them to one another in a systematic manner. However, De Quincey draws evidence from his observations and concludes that some of the distinct features of his dreams stand for distinct features of how his mind works. He finds out that his dreams always collect the materials from former experiences and impressions which "never fade from [his] mind" (COE, 62), and they manage to break the veil and combine the two worlds of the present conscious and the one of the past preserved in his mind. De Quincey's dreams represent and remember more than the totality of his own single self:

The minutest incidents of childhood, or forgotten scenes of later years, were often revived: I could not be said to recollect them; for if I had been told of them when waking, I should not have been able to acknowledge them as part of my past experience. But placed as they were before me, in dreams like intuitions, and clothed in all their evanescent circumstances



and accompanying feelings, I recognized them instantaneously. (*COE*, 68-69)

The seemingly forgotten memories come back to De Quincey through dreams. These dreams overpower De Quincey's consciousness, which he thought he could rely on in deciding whether to remember or to forget certain memories. De Quincey's naivety in his observation of his dreams is evident once psychoanalysis reveals that whatever we think may no longer exist in our memory may be repressed in the realm of the unconscious.

In dreams, where his mind displays the power of retrieving memories, the old experiences are no longer hidden in the dark, but are actively revived.

...I feel assured, that there is no such thing as forgetting possible to the mind; a thousand accidents may, and will interpose a veil between our present consciousness and the secret inscription on the mind; accidents of the same sort will also rend away this veil; but alike, whether veiled or unveiled, the inscription remains for ever; just as stars seem to withdraw before the common light of day ... waiting to be revealed when the obscuring daylight shall have withdrawn. (*COE*, 69)

To forget always involves remembering what has been forgotten, and in remembering what has been forgotten, forgetting manifests its paradoxical existence. De Quincey pleads that he was not able to arrange his dreams and life events in a consistent chronological order when it comes to writing the *Confessions*, therefore he sometimes speaks in the present tense and sometimes in the past tense. However, he is certain that such incoherence of tenses could little affect the accuracy of his observations; because writing draws its material, the same as dreaming, from the impressions that never fade. (*COE*, 62) Even though he falls short of making historically accurate interpretations with historical precision, De Quincey is more confident in his ability to form a reliable textual self through rhetorical constructions.

In the *Confessions*, De Quincey makes general observations about the attributes of the mind; in *Suspiria*, he continues to elaborate his interpretations of the faculty

and compares the human brain to a palimpsest:

Everlasting layers of ideas, images, feelings, have fallen upon your brain softly as light. Each succession has seemed to bury all that went before. And yet in reality not one has been extinguished....in our own heavenly-created palimpsest, the deep memorial palimpsest of the brain, there are not and cannot be such incoherencies. The fleeting accidents of a man's life, and its external shows, may indeed be irrelate and incongruous; but the organizing principles which fuse into harmony, and gather about fixed predetermined centres, whatever heterogeneous elements life may have accumulated from without, will not permit the grandeur of human unity greatly to be violated, or its ultimate repose to be troubled in the retrospect from dying moments, or from other great convulsions. (*SP*, 144)

De Quincey makes his point clearer here by stating that present consciousness finds it difficult to remember everything, but it is also impossible for the human brain to forget anything. As discussed in Chapter Three, the palimpsestic nature of the mind rules out the possibility of forgetting is that time is redefined so that the power of erasing memories is no longer asserted. The capacity of human memory exceeds conscious understanding and estimation, which also testifies to the unknown existence of what Freud would later build his theory upon—the unconscious. The mind preserves everything; it preserves the “human unity” with an intact wholeness if the mind does not forget. Based on his observations, De Quincey is convinced that the self is separated into two parts, the present consciousness and the system which stores memories. De Quincey's understanding is advanced for his time, not only because his concepts anticipate later disciplines of human psychology, but is also because he believes that the investigation of the nature of self should not derive its conclusion from collecting the record of one's deeds in life when the depictions and interpretations of the internal world are equally significant.

De Quincey's idea that internal writing leading to a complete picture of humanity is influential and monumental for modernist works. Woolf's insistence on

the real depiction of the character proposed in “Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown” expresses the same outlook on the writing of lives. “One line of insight” is woven more than a three volume realist novels, as Woolf proposes; and such insight into life bears resemblance to De Quincey’s writing of his own life. The insight on life should shine into the dark and shadowy realms of human psychology, as Woolf says, in order to discover what picture our minds have to offer. De Quincey tries to balance his life events and the realm of his dreams in his writing in order to represent a true interpretation of his subjectivity, underlying what his mind has already digested and projected into the world of dreams. In other words, there is no understanding of the world that could possibly be disconnected from a subjective perspective, and this makes human perception more encompassing than a mechanical report of the world.

Charles Proudfit parallels De Quincey and Freud to elaborate both their contributions to the understanding of the mind, and points out how De Quincey’s pioneering ideas foreshadow psychoanalytic theory in the twentieth century.<sup>135</sup> So far, as we have seen, De Quincey’s observation of the mind and its own mechanisms assumes that the human mind is an independent organism. The existence of a separate mental mechanism excites the same dilemma of being and becoming again. However, the dilemma of being and becoming may not be as mutually exclusive as we might believe. Even in psychoanalysis, which endorses and elaborates the existence of human unconsciousness, the creative injection of human will is still profound.

Psychoanalysis recognises the importance of expression and narrative while embracing the unconscious. The talking cure is seen by psychoanalysis as a possible way of retrieving past memories, and itself is a journey of recovering from traumatic experience that causes psychotic or neurotic symptoms. Referred to as “chimney

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<sup>135</sup> Thomas De Quincey: Bicentenary Studies (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1985) is edited by Robert Lance Snyder; it is a collection of critical essays to the study of Thomas De Quincey.

sweeping” for its purpose of clearing emotional issues, the nature of the talking cure is creative and literary, depending on the free association of the narrator. Its use of language and the narrative of one’s own private self touch on the same fundamental elements of confession. Like De Quincey’s *Confessions*, the purpose of engaging in creating a narrative is not about redemption as much as inventing a textual self accepted by the writing or speaking subject. Of course, the aspect of inventing a self through a talking cure may look at odds with the assumption of a pre-existing unconscious waiting to be discovered in psychoanalysis, yet the existence of unconscious arguably only obtains its existence in the words of patients.

Writing to create the knowledge of the self is seen as a fundamental drive of art. Freud believes that the importance of generating a “creative story in which key collections are linked to form a therapeutic autobiographical narrative (25)” is crucial. The importance of being able to express the self in linguistic form is emphasised in “Creative Writers and Day-dreaming” where Freud compares writers to day-dreamers. Freud suggests that while a writer writes, like a day-dreamer, he “creates a world of his own, or, rather, re-arranges the things of his world in a new way.”<sup>136</sup> The ability to rearrange a story to represent the self echoes the attempt to ease the difference between the unified and dispersed self. In Lacanian theory, the capacity to verbalise is regarded as recuperative, because linguistic representation of the inner world is a way to perfect, with necessary alterations, corrections and imagination, personal memories of the past in present consciousness into a narrative. For De Quincey, writing serves the same function; with rhetorical retrospection, he finds language capable of representing his understanding of the mind and succeeds in translating a conceptual and importantly, a psychological subjectivity into a literary one. With selective

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<sup>136</sup> Sigmund Freud, *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. James Strachey (London: Vintage, 2001), Vol. 9, 144.

modification, the speaking “I” with the voice of the internal self takes a literary presence.

For De Quincey, the perceptive mind reveals the fictional nature of the self and becomes the subject matter of his autobiographical writings. De Quincey’s mental activities also define who he is in framing his life story. The world revolves around De Quincey, but things are much less valuable and less meaningful without his active involvement. It is not the world that defines him; his own private and personal reflections are what guarantee his individual existence. Lindop points out that De Quincey’s life events should only be regarded as background information which may possibly explain his mental activities (249). However, De Quincey’s mental activities are important because they elucidate a solitary self-inquiry. If opium is the “master key” that leads De Quincey to the world of dreams, then dreams and other mental activities are windows that open on the realm of the human mind. To comprehend the human mind through such a cluster of activities is De Quincey’s ultimate goal. If, according to Nietzsche, all categories of reason are of sensual origin (270), then De Quincey is devoted to studying the sensual organ of human reasons; the sensual organ that invents him and, to an extent, invents the world around him.

Freud suggests that writing is like day-dreaming, where reality may be suspended. However, Hanna Segal argues convincingly that writing is credible in the way that it carries the writer back to the real world. It is an intricate argument to claim that writing is a way of escape from reality, while suggesting an artistic work is a way of returning, simultaneously, back to reality. To clarify this, Segal explains what the process of writing is: “The work of art is, I think, an expression of this working through. The nature of psychic conflict and the way the artist tries to resolve it in his

unconscious ego may throw light on the significant form.”<sup>137</sup> From Segal, it is easily understood that what really matters for the writer lies in the whole process of writing and the production of a work. Writing embodies the process and the act of expressing, and a written work is its physical existence. Segal therefore suggests that the written work is an important way for writers to stave off the world of vagueness. She points out the difference between a day-dreamer and a writer: “In one important way, however, [a writer] differs from the day-dreamer in that he finds a way back to reality in his artistic creation.” (77) With the wish to write and the subjective understanding of himself, De Quincey’s past exists no longer in the past; the process of articulation turns the past “into a narrative, not on the past itself, which really has no existence outside that formulation” (Jay, 26). What matters here, again, is not the facticity of personal history, as vital significance resides “in the creative capacity of language” (Jay, 26). Such interpretation, though it may be created and fictional, signifies De Quincey’s own process of putting abstract thoughts into concrete linguistic presentation—a realisation of Nietzsche’s will to power.

#### Damasio’s Answer to De Quincey’s Dilemma

De Quincey’s dilemma of choosing between literary creation and psychological discovery is explained through Nietzsche and Freud; but it is clear in De Quincey’s writings that he acknowledges the coexistence of the two. The ambivalence between being and becoming in De Quincey’s autobiographical confession suggests the uncertainty when De Quincey tries to establish the knowledge of the self on a model of the stable united self of Enlightenment thinking; such ambivalence further manifests itself in De Quincey’s interchangeable use of terms—mind and brain. In De

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<sup>137</sup> Hanna Segal, *Dream, Phantasy and Art* (London: Routledge, 1991), 70.

Quincey's writings, the mind and the brain are used constantly but interchangeably to refer to the capacity and apparatus of the internal world. Though the medical study of human psychology and the human brain were not yet fully established fields of study in the nineteenth century, De Quincey's observation seems to indicate two different selves which result in two different perspectives. On the one hand, De Quincey employs writing to create a textual self for himself and his readers; on the other, he is also fascinated by the inner self who shows its magnificent power in dreams and memories.

In the same paragraph on how the historical accuracy of De Quincey's writing is impaired by his disorganised notes, he uses both "mind" and "brain" to describe the situation:

Few of the notes, perhaps, were written exactly at the period of time to which they relate; but this can little affect their accuracy; as the impressions were such that they can never fade from my mind. Much has been omitted. I could not, without effort, constrain myself to the task of either recalling, or constructing into a regular narrative, the whole burden of horrors which lies upon my brain. (*COE*, 62)

The use of mind and brain is ambiguous. In this paragraph, De Quincey's understandings of the mind and the brain make the two look the same. In *Suspiria*, however, De Quincey calls the human brain "a natural and mighty palimpsest" (*SP*, 144) that consists of "Everlasting layers of ideas, images, feelings" (*SP*, 144). De Quincey calls the mental attributes of the inner world brain and gives it a mechanical and physical implication, when he was clearly describing the mental power rather than the medical characteristics.

Whether De Quincey's interchangeable use of mind and brain implies a premature acknowledgement of the difference between psychology and anatomy is uncertain. De Quincey's sense of self also circles around an interesting philosophical paradox of the coexistence of becoming and being, and his question foreshadows and

could perhaps be answered by Antonio Damasio's observation from a neurologist's point of view. Damasio proposes two statuses of the self—an autobiographical self and a core self. The two selves are not mutually exclusive, but mutually dependent. In Damasio's definition, the autobiographical self is "based on a repository of memories...that can be partly reactivated and thus provide continuity and seeming permanence in our lives" while the core self, with modern medical understanding, is "a central resource produced by a circumscribed mental and neural system."<sup>138</sup> The core self, compared to the autobiographical self, is transient, floating and always changing. A complete picture of the self embodies and incorporates the two: "we need both core consciousness and working memory to make the autobiographical self explicit, that is, to display the contents of autobiographical self in extended consciousness." (217) Damasio's elaboration provides a new perspective for approaching De Quincey's dilemma between becoming and being to suggest the collaboration of the stable self and the transient self leads to a unified sense of self.

Indeed, the autobiographical writing of the self reflects what Damasio calls the autobiographical self that is constructed by the accumulation of biographical facts. But it is with the help of the core self, the transient responses of the neural participation, that the writer is able to reach a sense of unity of the self. De Quincey's devotion to writing answers not only the authenticity of the story or the creative nature of language, but more fundamentally the intricate relationship between how the whole process of writing, a recall of memory, the use of language, and the organic response of the writing subject represents the idea of self. Damasio concludes his observations:

The idea each of us constructs of ourself, the image we gradually build of

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<sup>138</sup> Antonio Damasio, *The Feeling of What Happens: Body, Emotion and the Making of Consciousness* (London: Vintage, 2000), 217.



who we are physically and mentally, of where we fit socially, is based on autobiographical memory over years of experience and is constantly subject to remodelling. (224)

Following Damasio's logic, the shaping of the self happens "nonconsciously and so does the remodelling." (224) By introducing the physical side of forming the sense of self into the argument, Damasio liberates us from trying to pin down, between being and becoming, which forms the fundamental knowledge of the self for De Quincey. Damasio's acceptance of a dual self helps to explain De Quincey's attempts in writing to encompass both the power of literature and the magnificence of the mind.

By determining what is fundamental in the knowledge of the self and the writing of subjective interpretation, De Quincey tries, as Nietzsche has it, to "know what being is, in order to decide whether this or that is real" (Nietzsche, 269). De Quincey extends the Romantic emphasis on sensibility to a closer inspection of every flowing and elusive moment of the mind in rhetorical construction. Nietzsche's words both encapsulate and conclude De Quincey's efforts, as well as the argument of this chapter: "The assumption of one single subject is perhaps unnecessary, perhaps it is just as permissible to assume a multiplicity of subjects, whose interaction and struggle is the basis of our thought and our consciousness in general?" (270). De Quincey's contribution is manifested in his continuous belief and effort in writing his "felt self"; therefore Virginia Woolf praises De Quincey's autobiographical writing:

...he understood by autobiography the history not only of the external life but of the deeper and more hidden emotions....To tell the whole story of a life the autobiographer must devise some means by which the two levels of existence can be recorded—the rapid passages of events and actions; the slow opening up of single and solemn moments of concentrated emotion. (*CR II*, 139)

From De Quincey's writings of life, the original question of how to categorise autobiography as a genre is replaced by his persistent questioning and searching quest for knowledge of the self. If autobiography is nothing but a quest for self-knowledge,

in the wake of De Quincey's fragmentary writings, Woolf believes the literary world has discovered a different way of interpreting life, which is open and welcoming rather than exclusive and limiting.

## Chapter Six:

### Woolf's Literary Journey of Writing the Self

De Quincey's autobiographical writing constituted a prominent part of his writing career, and it is praised as setting up a new model for autobiographical writing by Woolf. De Quincey's ability to combine descriptions of the "external events" and of the internal "secret springs of action and reserve" (*CR II*, 139) through his own style of prose poetry is regarded by Woolf as opening a new direction for life-writing. The ideal status of recording the two currents of life plays an important part in Woolf's theory of life-writing, which leads her to profound thinking about how writing could represent life through an artistic approach. As much as Woolf admires De Quincey's autobiographical writings and shares the same quest of investigating the nature of the self through writing, she never published a formal autobiography during her career, though numerous essays and sketches offer autobiographical materials. Writing critical essays, biographies, and casting autobiographical allusions everywhere in her novels, Woolf's own attempt of writing herself takes an indirect route of expression. If *Moments of Being* had never been published posthumously, readers would still be left with abundant resources to examine Woolf's aesthetics of autobiographical writing, which she incorporates into her essays and novels. This chapter examines Woolf's dispersed ideas on life-writing in her critical and creative writings before turning the focus of study to her own practice of private memoirs and autobiographies, which profoundly embody her artistic theories.

The discussion of writing the self is different in De Quincey and in Woolf. Unlike De Quincey's prolific autobiographical writings, Woolf's attempts at writing autobiography are always reserved and private. Much of Woolf's ideas on life-writing

in relation to the self can be found, however, in her elaboration on the art of biographical writing. This leads the focus of this chapter to how Woolf treats biographies and devises the artistry of biographical writing before discussing her own autobiographical writings. Meanwhile, speaking of Woolf and her autobiographical writings, it is very tempting to employ psychoanalysis as the language of interpretation especially when Woolf has a close, albeit often fraught and disavowed, but nevertheless personal relation with psychoanalysis. However, this is not how this chapter will proceed nor do I wish to draw psychoanalytical conclusions in this chapter. In the same way as the previous chapter examines how De Quincey's questions about the nature of the self influence and result in the fragmented style of his writing, this chapter will examine the ways in which Woolf's artistic writings influence and inspire her gradually acquired knowledge of the self. Woolf's biographer, Hermione Lee, points to the limitations of applying psychoanalysis to look at Woolf's life and work; as much as Woolf's mind might be at the same time the site of origin responsible for her creative art and her mental distress, her artistic devotion should not be rendered equivalent to or equal with her emotional life, nor should it be seen as a result of it.<sup>139</sup> As Peter Gay observes, "Reductionism is by no means an obligatory effect of psychoanalytic biographies".<sup>140</sup> Accordingly, it is not the focus of this chapter to conduct a biographical study, even though Woolf never denied her life invaded her work. What Woolf herself warns us is that a misuse of psychoanalysis "simplifies rather than complicates, detracts rather than enriches".<sup>141</sup> As such this chapter will attend to the human side of art and treat Woolf as an individual - rather than a case - as Woolf herself would like to have been recognised.

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<sup>139</sup> Hermione Lee, *Virginia Woolf* (London: Vintage, 1997).

<sup>140</sup> Peter Gay, "On Not Psychoanalyzing Virginia Woolf", *The American Scholar*, Vol. 71 (2002): 74.

<sup>141</sup> Virginia Woolf, "Freudian Fiction", *A Woman's Essay* (London: Penguin, 1992), 23.

### A Covert Autobiographer

Woolf's writing of the self progresses and matures with her creative writings; the culture of the self is inseparable from the art of fiction. Art breeds Woolf's narrative of the self. From an artistic point of view, Woolf's literary interest and devotion to the biographical self began around the same time as writing *To the Lighthouse* (1927), in which art as a tool and self as a problem are combined in the narrative. In her 1939 essay, "The Art of Biography", Virginia Woolf stated that "interest in our selves and in other people's selves is a late development of the human mind." (*DM*, 120) Indeed, Woolf's interest in life-writing is long-established. Daniel Albright suggests that Woolf begins and ends her career as an autobiographer.<sup>142</sup> Yet, the only autobiographical work ever published is in *Moments of Being*, collected and published posthumously, especially "Sketch of the Past". Reading and writing autobiographies and biographies extensively, Woolf remains a secret lover of life-writing. As Hermione Lee suggests, Woolf "was an autobiographer who never published an autobiography" for the reason that she "was an egotist who loathed egotism." (Lee, 5) Woolf's preoccupation with life-writing is more of a perpetual concern scattered throughout her essays and fictions, in her view of history, in her feminism and her politics, rather than as an act of self-indulgence or self-absorption. Woolf's sense of being is developed along with her writing career, as she says: "I thought...something very profound about the synthesis of my being: how only writing composes it: how nothing makes a whole unless I am writing" (*WD*, 201).

Her thoughts on life-writing and the self are immersed and matured in her creative essays and fictions. Woolf finds it hard to resist biographies and says: "for what could be more amusing? As everybody knows, the fascination of reading

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<sup>142</sup> Daniel Albright, "Virginia Woolf as Autobiographer", *The Kenyon Review*, Vol. 6 (1984), 1.

biographies is irresistible.” (*CR II*, 237) Biographies are magic vessels with the past sealed in them and all one needs to do is “to look and to listen and to listen and to look and soon the little figures...will begin to move and to speak” (*CR II*, 237). Reading others’ lives is amusing, and such interest penetrates into her writing as well. Chronologically, after her first apprentice attempt of *The Voyage Out* (1915), Woolf published *Night and Day* (1919), *Jacob’s Room* (1923), and *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925), before publically showing a devoted interest in life-writing. After *To the Lighthouse*, she engaged in various life-writings in the form of novels and essays, including *Orlando*, *Flush*, the biography of Roger Fry and several important essays on life-writing.

#### *Night and Day* and the Break from the Past

In the first half of Woolf’s career, life-writing was an idea that had not been publicly explored in her work. She was still thinking about how to tackle the problem of writing one’s life and how to capture one’s mind as well as how to make the story meaningful and artistic. *Night and Day*<sup>143</sup> is her first attempt at touching on the issue of life-writing. Being the first attempt at life-writing, *Night and Day* is Woolf’s reflection on the tricky relationship between the past and the present, the private and the public, the artistic and the scientific. If Woolf has constantly been intrigued by the question of intersubjectivity, then the field of life-writing seems to bear the conflicts of these dynamic relationships.

Mrs. Hilbery’s dilemma in writing her father’s biography is where Woolf began to think about the art of life-writing from the perspective of Katherine Hilbery. Mrs. Hilbery publicly announces the commencement of writing the biography of her father,

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<sup>143</sup> Virginia Woolf, *Night and Day* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992). Hereafter cited with abbreviation, *ND*.

but very little progress has been made after a decade has passed since her great statement. The first problem of life-writing is a problem of time; it is the ambiguous relationship between the present and the past. In the eyes of Katherine, Mrs. Hilbery's relationship with the past is a heavy burden because Mrs. Hilbery is convinced that when talking about "what is the *present*?" that "Half of it's the past, and the better half, too" (ND, 9). An obvious attachment to the past hinders Mrs. Hilbery's writing; the indecisive separation from the past makes it hard to illustrate what has already become the past, the historical: "Mrs. Hilbery had in her own head as bright a vision of the time as now remained to the living, and could give those flashes and thrills to the old words which gave them almost the substance of flesh." (ND, 36) The problem of the ambiguous blending of the past into the present makes Katherine wonder whether, perhaps, Mrs. Hilbery "no longer knew what the truth was" since "As Mrs. Hilbery grew older she thought more and more of the past, and this ancient disaster seemed at times almost to prey upon her mind, as if she could not pass out of life herself" (ND, 102).

Mrs. Hilbery's adherence to the past symbolises a shared problem for modernist writers, for whom the long history of the literary past in the shape of legacy and tradition appeared to clash with the present impulses of individual talent. Mrs. Hilbery's dependence upon the past is experienced by Katherine, too, as Katherine "could fancy that here was a deep pool of past time, and that she and her mother were bathed in the light of sixty years ago. What could the present give, she wondered, to compare with the rich crowd of gifts bestowed by the past?" (ND, 114) Katherine sees this as the "inaptitude" of Mrs. Hilbery; but also that it is not her fault because for someone who wishes to write, "it is a little depressing to inherit not lands but an example of intellectual and spiritual virtue" (ND, 35). Katherine is sympathetic because she feels the same "despondency" about the weight of tradition bearing down

on her, when “The glorious past, in which men and women grew to unexampled size, intruded too much upon the present, and dwarfed it too consistently, to be altogether encouraging to one forced to make her experiment in living when the great age was dead.” (*ND*, 35)

The intrusion of the past into the present is amplified when the past is conceived in the terms of a glorious era. The present is not only intruded on but overshadowed. These are the problems of writing a biography for Mrs. Hilbery, and as shall be discussed later, these are also the issues of literary inheritance for Woolf. The difficulty of having an overwhelming past lies in how to make the decision between following the old path or creating a new one. The idea of the greatness of the past is constantly challenged and reviewed in *Night and Day*; and the traditional idea of preserving and presenting the image of greatness makes writing the biography a difficult task. The question of “what to leave in and what to leave out” becomes a “radical” one, because Mrs. Hilbery “could not decide how far the public was to be told the truth about the poet’s separation from his wife.” (*ND*, 37)

The proper content of life-writing was a point of discussion in De Quincey’s *Confessions*; De Quincey begins his *Confessions* with an apology “for breaking through that delicate and honourable reserve, which, for the most part, restrains us from the public exposure of our own errors and infirmities.” (*COE*, 1) De Quincey, though, apologised for his inconsiderate behaviour and recognised that whatever lay underneath the “decent drapery” could be the material of life-writing. De Quincey makes the separation between guilt and misery and suggests that “Infirmity and misery do not, of necessity, imply guilt.” (*COE*, 2) De Quincey’s liberal attitude, however, is not shared by Victorians as Woolf observes that “the majority of Victorian biographies are like the wax figures now preserved in Westminster Abbey, that were carried in funeral processions through the street—effigies that have only a smooth



superficial likeness to the body in the coffin.”<sup>144</sup> These “formidable old creatures” (ND, 34) took Katherine’s arms, looked keenly into her eyes, and told her she must be a good girl; she “very nearly lost consciousness that she is a separate being, with a future of her own.” (ND, 115) Past greatness is a mixed blessing, for it is also a burden.

Mrs. Hilbery cried that “It isn’t that I don’t know everything and feel everything (who did know him, if I don’t), but I can’t put it down, you see. There’s a kind of a blind spot” (ND, 116); she said “I really believe I’m bewitched! I only want three sentences, you see, something quite straightforward and commonplace, and I can’t find them.” (ND, 115) Mrs. Hilbery’s frustration is also Woolf’s implicit criticism of Edwardian literary convention, in which “a line of insight” (CDB, 102) is always absent. The search for a new expression haunts Mrs. Hilbery as well as Woolf. In a diary entry after finishing *Night and Day*, Woolf reflected on the philosophy of writing this novel in the collision of tradition and modernist writing:

I can’t help thinking that, English fiction being what it is, I compare for originality and sincerity rather well with most of the moderns....I don’t admit being hopeless though: only the spectacle is a profoundly strange one; and as the current one don’t do, one has to grope for a new one, and the process of discarding the old, when one is by no means certain what to put in their place, is a sad one. (WD, 10)

Under the shadow of past greatness, Woolf tried to find a voice of her own. Woolf provides us with a possible solution through Mrs. Hilbery’s struggle of writing a biography of her father (who, by no coincidence, was a great poet). When “the right phrase or the penetrating point of view” (ND, 37) appear in a sudden instance, Mrs. Hilbery could “write ecstatically for a few breathless moments” (ND, 37) and depict “the skies and trees of the past with every stroke of her pen, and recalling the voice of

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<sup>144</sup> Virginia Woolf, “The Art of Biography” in *The Death of the Moth* (London: Hogarth Press, 1942), 121. Hereafter cited with abbreviation, *DM*.

the dead.” (ND, 113-4) Though these moments are short, yet such a spur to creative epiphany does not simply make life-writing possible but injects the use of fictional creativity into the documentary of life events.

In “A Talk about Memoir” (1920), Woolf jokingly says “if I knew Mr. Lytton Strachey, I’d tell him what I think of him for behaving disrespectfully to the great English art of biography” because Strachey’s *Eminent Victorians* (1918) challenges and rejects the idea of “greatness” in life-writing by providing sketches of historical figures. “Dropsical” is how Woolf describes memoirs before Strachey’s *Eminent Victorians*: “I believe that the element of water is supplied chiefly by the memoir writer. Look what great swollen books they are! (She lifts five volumes in her hands, one after another.)”<sup>145</sup> The detailed but irrelevant description is redundant for Woolf; skipping pages and pages of content, the narrator claims: “Life is what we want.” (GR, 158) For the same reason as writing about life, “Several years were now omitted” (ND, 39) in Mrs. Hilbery’s biography of her father; what is left “were twenty pages upon [Katherine’s] grandfather’s taste in hats, an essay upon contemporary china, a long account of a summer day’s expedition into the country” (ND, 39). The emphasis on the fragmentariness of life and the demands of wholeness of the genre of biography is an idea that is brooded over in Woolf’s reflections on the genre of life-writing; yet, the concept is of equal importance in her fictional writing as well.

This emphasis on meaningful fragments and life itself is developed in “Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown” with a broader argument concerning the problems of Edwardian novels, which present similar problems to those colossal volumes of life-writing before Strachey. Woolf’s idea on the writing of character in modern fiction shares features with her views on what she believes modern day life-writing

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<sup>145</sup> Virginia Woolf, “A Talk about Memoir” in *Granite and Rainbow* (London: Hogarth Press, 1981), 156. Hereafter cited with abbreviation, GR.

should be. Woolf wishes that English writers could make Mrs. Brown into a “character” and “bring out her oddities and mannerism; her buttons and wrinkles; her ribbons and warts” (CDB, 97), much in the manner that Mrs. Hilbery wants to write about her father. While Hermione Lee’s statement that “Fiction is often [Woolf’s] version of biography” (Lee, 8) is true, it is also significant to observe how Woolf’s thinking about life-writing permeates the writing of her fictions and her writing about fiction.

### *Orlando* and the New Biography

Being overshadowed by past generations is a shared anxiety of modern writers; however, through Mrs. Hilbery, Katherine, Mrs. Brown, Ann and Lady Georgina Peel in “A talk about Memoir”, Woolf, unlike her modern peers, initiates her own personal and feminist route of reading and adapting tradition. When thinking about life-writing, Woolf thinks a lot about life, art and women. After *Night and Day*, *Orlando* is the next published fiction which meditates on life-writing; it is also in *Orlando* that Woolf experiments with many of her maturing literary and aesthetic ideas about the genre.

Amongst all of Woolf’s fictions, *Orlando* stands as the least mystically poetic work in her oeuvre. In most of Woolf’s novels, she presents conflicting positions on the central themes of life as she sees it— on subjectivity, gender, literature or history— and uses the form of fiction to attempt to reach a resolution of these conflicts through the aesthetic form itself. In *Orlando*, Woolf plays with the boundaries and conventions that have become constraints in life and writing. *Orlando* is meant to be a satirical ‘jeu d’esprit’. In her diary, Woolf described her preliminary ideas about writing *Orlando*:

No attempt is to be made to realise the character. Sapphism is to be suggested. Satire is to be the main note- satire and wildness. The ladies are to have Constantinople in view. Dreams of golden domes. My own lyric vein is to be satisfied. Everything mocked. And it is to end with three

dots ... so. For the truth is I feel the need of an escapade after these serious poetic experimental books whose form is always so closely considered. I want to kick up my heels and be off. (WD, 104)

*Orlando* is a writer's holiday for Woolf; however, she became more serious about *Orlando* as the writing of the novel progressed. She admits that: "The truth is I expect I began it as a joke and went on with it seriously" (WD, 126). The issues raised in *Orlando* do not, for the most part, depart from the theme of understanding the nature of the self and the problem of its representation in art and life as in her other novels, but these issues are dealt with in a different way. By telling the life story of Orlando, a woman who was once a man and lived over several centuries, Woolf examines every possible facet of that life and the capacity, and potential, of writing to blur those boundaries between life, literature, gender and history. By insisting that life can only be an ever open horizon of possibilities, of ways of seeing, interpreting and understanding, she also provides an internal critique of the conventional modes of historiography, biography and life-writing.

Mrs. Hilbery's uncertainty about what to write in her biography and how to arrange the life become the tasks Woolf sets out to investigate in *Orlando*. Through writing *Orlando*, Woolf experiments with the boundary of life-writing. The subtitle of *Orlando*, '*a biography*', opens up the whimsical project of this novel. With the little joke in the subtitle, Woolf was concerned that the book would be placed in the biography shelf where it did not belong.<sup>146</sup> However, being catalogued on the biography shelf, ironically, makes apparent the difference between *Orlando* and other biographies. As a novel, consisting of biographical elements, *Orlando* was intentionally written against the mode of conventional biographies. Woolf says: "It might be a way of

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<sup>146</sup> In her diary, Woolf was worried about the sale of *Orlando* if it was placed in the biography shelf. However, at a time "when no one wants biography, it is a novel (WD, 130)." And though Woolf was not sure whether she would have pay more for the fun calling *Orlando* a biography, she was certain "it was going to be the one popular book (WD, 130)."

writing the memoirs of one's own times during people's life time. It might be a most amusing book. The question is how to do it. Vita should be Orlando, a young nobleman. There should be Lytton; and it should be truthful but fantastic" (*Diary*, 112). Friends are to be written in to her novel; biographical allusions are to be utilised in her project; characters in *Orlando* are not those dead and grand figures of Victorian biographies. On the contrary, Orlando scarcely ages and s/he even changes sex and becomes a woman. This change of gender is a whimsical ploy to challenge the fixation of boundaries of all kinds, for gender is arguably the first and most distinctive human boundary: is Orlando a girl or a boy? While Mrs. Hilbery's father was an eminent poet born into a prestigious literary family of the Victorian Age, nothing about Orlando's status, gender and occupation remains the same or stable. Orlando's life is larger than the conventional idea of verisimilitude can convey. As Orlando's biographer observes, those that are valuable enough to be put into Orlando's biography are not only concerned with the outer world, but with what is meaningful for Orlando himself. Life for Orlando, and for others as well, cannot be neatly divided between the usual dichotomy of fact and fantasy; therefore the techniques in writing such a life must reflect the blurring of these categories.

During the writing of *Orlando*, Woolf closely observed recently published biographies. In "The New Biography", Woolf was inspired by *Some People*,<sup>147</sup> written by Harold Nicolson, husband to Vita Sackville-West, to whom *Orlando* is dedicated. She was not at all in accord with her father's Victorian approach to writing biography. Victorian biographies appear to be filled with "a sense of the prodigious waste"<sup>148</sup> for Woolf; when lives cease to "express themselves in action take shape in innumerable

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<sup>147</sup> In 1927, Harold Nicolson published a series of portraits which are both documentary and imaginary. Sources of his writing come from his experiences as well as imagination. Such writing of life inspires Woolf and is also employed in *Orlando*.

<sup>148</sup> Virginia Woolf, "The New Biography" from *Granite and Rainbow* (London: Hogarth Press, 1981), 151. Hereafter cited with abbreviation, *GR*.

words.” (GR, 151) With the obsession with “the idea of greatness” (GR, 151), though Victorian biographies “are laden with truth”, they fail to express the real personality of their subjects: “[t]he figure is almost always above life size in top hat and frock coat, and the manner of presentation becomes increasingly clumsy and laborious.” (GR, 151) And, perhaps to answer what troubles Mrs. Hilbery, Woolf persuades readers that while truth and personality stand opposite to each other, one is of granite-like hardness and one is as transient as rainbows; it is impossible to “maintain that life consists in actions only or in words. It consists in personality. Something has been liberated beside which all else seems cold and colourless.” (GR, 150) It is for the exact reasons mentioned above that Woolf praised *Some People* as a good illustration of the new attitude to biography because it breaks the boundary of fact and fiction: “*Some People* is not fiction because it has the substance, the reality of truth. It is not biography because it has the freedom, the artistry of fiction” (GR, 152).

Reflecting on the writing of lives, Woolf believes biographies should be “the truthful transmission of personality (GR, 149)”. For Woolf, a good biographer should not choose the easy path by considering the truth of life to be showing itself only “in action which is evident”, and neglecting “the inner life of thought and emotion which meanders darkly and obscurely through the hidden channels of the soul,” because “it would seem that the life which is increasingly real to us is the fictitious life; it dwells in the personality rather than in the act. (GR, 149)” Recording one’s life only as it appears in actions and words rather than in thoughts and emotions ensures that the biographical portrait has only “superficial likeness” to its subject and hinders the subject’s personality from being expressed. In the same way as Woolf realises these changes in modern literature, she points out “a change came over biography, as it came over fiction and poetry.” (GR, 151) Such change gives a new definition of the relationship between the author and the subject. The biographer “is no longer the serious and sympathetic

companion, toiling even slavishly in the footsteps of his hero"; the biographer is now "an equal" (*GR*, 152). Given the freedom and right of "independent judgment" (*GR*, 152), the biographer "has ceased to be the chronicler; he has become an artist", who "chooses and synthesizes" (*GR*, 152). Of her contemporaries, she noted: "They approach their bigwigs fearlessly...they maintain that the man himself, the pith and essence of his character, shows itself to the observant eye in the tone of a voice, the turn of a head, some little phrase or anecdote picked up in a passage" (*GR*, 153) in order to represent characters with a lively personal touch. From her own observations, as well as from examining the biographies written by her favorite contemporary life writer, Strachey, she thinks "the intimate, domestic view", which occupies today's biographical writing, was brought to the centre of biography. (Briggs, 26) Bearing all this in mind, Woolf herself wants to bring something new to biographical writing to make biographies capable of expressing the subject as an "extremely human man" (*GR*, 153). It was Woolf's ideal that "We may sit, even with the great and the good, over the table and talk." (*GR*, 150) These arguments Woolf made about life-writing are clearly elaborated in the fictional biography of Orlando.

At the beginning of the novel, Woolf draws the analogy between the biographer of Orlando and Orlando's mother, between writing and birthing a life: "Happy the mother who bears, happier still the biographer who records the life of such a one!" (*OL*, 14) These are more than feelings of love addressed to Vita Sackville-West, to whom this fictional biography is dedicated; Woolf explores the intriguing relationship between life and writing in the same way she views fictional writing. In the reading of *Orlando*, McIntire suggests that "Biography... is not simply life writing,... it is also life giving, as Woolf proposes that writing breeds life, and that the two grounds of writing and living coexist in a dialectical relationship." (McIntire, 119-20) As a pseudo-biographer, Woolf embodies her ideals of biography in the writing of a fictional

life of Orlando. Reviewing biographical writings, the question of how to balance truth and creativity is always important for Woolf. At the early stage of writing *Orlando*, Woolf wrote in her diary: “I am writing *Orlando* half in a mock style very clear and plain, so that people will understand every word. But the balance between truth and fantasy must be careful” (*WD*, 115). A biography consisting of “the reality of truth and the artistry of fiction” (*GR*, 152) is what Woolf tried to achieve.

Having gone through the Elizabethan Age and the Great Frost, Orlando falls into a profound sleep as an English Duke in Constantinople for seven days. The biographer pleads and says how nice it would be if the biographer could announce the death of Orlando and put an end to his writing, but this could happen only if there were no urge for truth:

Would that we might here take the pen and write *Finis* to our work! Would that we might spare the reader what is to come and say to him in so many words, Orlando died and was buried. But here, alas, Truth, Candour, and Honesty, the austere Gods who keep watch and ward by the inkpot of the biographer, cry No! Putting their silver trumpets to their lips they demand in one blast, Truth! And again they cry Truth! ... The Truth and nothing but the Truth! (*OL*, 129)

With a capital T, what is the Truth here for Orlando and for the austere Gods?

Following this final call for the Truth Orlando wakes up and turns into a woman. This is what happened to Orlando as recorded by the biographer, and this is the Truth about Orlando which is demanded by the Gods. But is this Truth ‘true’ enough to be believed by readers of the fictional biography? Such ‘Truth’ challenges the conventional concept that always links truth mostly with probability and the reliability of the laws of causality, space and time. Therefore, the biographer, again, pleads through lack of historical documents that s/he is incapable of testifying to the “trueness” of the Truth: “Just when we thought to elucidate a secret that has puzzled historians for a hundred of years, there was a hole in the manuscript big enough to put



your finger through.” (*OL*, 115) With the lack of documentary records, the biographer says: “We have done our best to piece out a meagre summary from the charred fragments that remain; but often it has been necessary to speculate, to surmise, and even to use the imagination.” (*OL*, 115) The fine line between a biographer and a creative writer is getting more and more indefinite.

But what is truth? Woolf somewhat mocks historians who focus on nothing but records; she also playfully subverts rigid ideas of truth, and tries to broaden, or even to blur, the boundaries between what are regarded as facts and fantasies. Naremore points out that the “historian’s facts threaten our survival, so that Mrs. Woolf’s playful satire of historicism in *Orlando* represents a perfectly serious attempt to show us a world which cannot be explained by fact, a world in which the changes wrought by historical process become merely ‘what you see us by.’”<sup>149</sup> Life is too often fragmentarily lived and left behind; and is therefore destined to be “meagre”. It is easier to recognise only one definition of truth when writing and piecing together a life; but a biographer’s task is more about recognising all possibilities than setting up one way of reading and writing a life. Woolf wants the biography to deal not only with the “shell” of a life, but the “eternal being” that transcends its normally conceived bounds, as Naremore concludes. For Woolf, truth never exists simply in the outer life of any individual. Considering the writing of one’s life, Woolf says:

But these facts are not like the facts of science—once they are discovered, always the same. They are subject to changes... Many of the old chapter headings- life at college, marriage, career- are shown to be very arbitrary and artificial distinctions. The real current of the hero’s existence took, very likely, a different course. Thus the biographer must go ahead of the rest of us, like the miner’s canary, testing the atmosphere, detecting falsity, unreality, and the presence of obsolete conventions. (*DM*, 124)

As a biographer, deciding what truth is becomes the premise of writing a subject’s life.

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<sup>149</sup> James Naremore, *The World Without a Self* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1973), 193.

In contrast to Victorian beliefs, truth for Woolf is no longer the stable concept she wished to believe, which has “granite-like solidity” (*GR*, 149); the idea of truth has been expanded and enlarged to include not only what happens in the outer world, but also feelings, memories and thoughts of individuals that take place on the inside—a fully rounded character. Events in the external world are only partial truths; and to capture the other half, though Woolf does not point this out explicitly, realism as it existed in the Victorian age is no longer adequate. The restricted concept of truth as presented in conventional biographies further constrains the understanding of the self; accordingly, when facing a self conceived of as an open ‘horizon’ with myriad possibilities, as a novelist, Woolf adopts the craft of a biographer in writing *Orlando* and examines the boundary of the genre as well as one’s potentiality in life.

#### Androgyny Disarms Dualism

Status, age, and family wealth are obvious measures of one’s identity; however, Woolf finds it difficult to recognise the importance of these measures to the same extent as Victorian biographers do. As part of a series of strategies for disintegrating traditional life-writing, genre is the next to be reconsidered. After waking up from the long sleep, Orlando is now a woman.

The change of sex, though it altered their future, did nothing whatever to alter their identity. Their faces remained, as their portraits prove, practically the same. His memory—but in future we must, for convention’s sake, say ‘her’ for ‘his’, and ‘she’ for ‘he’—her memory then, went back through all the events of her past life without countering any obstacles.  
(*OL*, 133)

Orlando remains intact even with the change of sex, as if the change is so external that it does not touch her at all. Orlando’s ‘identity’, consists of outer appearance and inner memory, as Woolf suggests, does not change with the alteration of sex (though a change

in circumstance might lead us to re-evaluate the terms of that memory and recognise aspects of former experience heretofore unacknowledged). The change of sex does not make Orlando a different person, though her feminine dresses do begin to make her aware of what it may be like to be a woman—and what it meant or signified to be a man which, until the change of sex, s/he simply took for granted. The things that were beyond ‘his’ experience now are there waiting for ‘her’ to explore. Gender here does not arbitrarily cut Orlando into two distinct and opposite individuals in which there is no possibility of communication. Instead, with the ease of this sex change of Orlando, the seemingly inevitable impact that gender has on individuals appears to be neither dramatic nor critical: “Orlando looked himself up and down in a long looking-glass, without showing any signs of discomposure.... The change seemed to have been accomplished painlessly and completely and in such a way that Orlando herself showed no surprise at it.” (*OL*, 133) With such an easy and smooth change of sex, Woolf makes us rethink the opposing dualism of gender definition.

Is androgyny Woolf’s proposed route to the termination of dualistic assumptions in gender identification? Becoming a woman, Orlando slides across the gender line and is now able to understand more about the mysteries that once puzzled her in her identity as a man: “For now, a thousand hints had become plain to her that were then dark. Now, the obscurities, which divides the sexes and lets linger innumerable impurities in its gloom, was removed” (*OL*, 154). For Orlando, the boundary between men and women is no longer there. Woolf’s idea of androgyny might have taken its origin of thought from Coleridge, who said: “The truth is, a great mind must be androgynous.”<sup>150</sup> Coleridge’s use of androgyny is a literary one. In Coleridge’s view, the androgynous mind is the concept “that creativity in human consciousness, as in

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<sup>150</sup> Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Specimens of the Table Talk of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*. (<http://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/8489/pg8489.html>)

nature and the life of the body, results not from the domination of matter by mind or of emotions by reason, but from a transforming synthesis of opposing but complementary—and thus figuratively masculine and feminine—elements.”<sup>151</sup> In Coleridge’s formulation, gender norms are only figurative. The qualification of ideal literature is to bring unity among opposing approaches.

Woolf’s idea of androgyny provokes divergent discussion. Critics like Bazin agree with Woolf’s idea of a balanced equilibrium of the masculine and the feminine,<sup>152</sup> whereas Showalter accuses Woolf of finding an escape in the idea and forgetting her own female experience.<sup>153</sup> Showalter argues that the idea of androgyny is Woolf’s passive resolution as a novelist, as well as a woman, when facing dominant male judgments: “Woolf’s ‘androgyny’ was a struggle to keep two rival forces in balance without succumbing to either” (266). Showalter questions Woolf’s positive interpretation of ‘androgyny’ and its possibilities: “How could any woman writer pretend to be androgynous—indifferent, undivided—in the grip of such inhibition? At some level, Woolf is aware that androgyny is another form of repression or, at best, self-discipline.” (288) In other words, Showalter suggests that instead of trying not to succumb to either masculine or feminine forces, Woolf is trapped within the idea of androgyny. And the idea is no doubt a failure because Woolf ends up killing herself—or retreating to a room of her own in the sense of a burial place or grave—in order to avoid confronting these two opposed rival forces. Showalter believes that to keep an androgynous mind is almost as difficult as to define the very fine line between the two sexes and the values they embody.

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<sup>151</sup> James Hold McGavran Jr., “Coleridge, the Wordworths, and Androgyny: A Reading of ‘The Nightingale’”, *South Atlantic Review*, Vol. 53 (1988): 59.

<sup>152</sup> Nancy Topping Bazin, *Virginia Woolf and the Androgynous Vision* (New York: Rutgers University Press, 1976).

<sup>153</sup> Elaine Showalter, *A Literature of Their Own: British Women Novelists from Brontë to Lessing* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1999).

However, Showalter's interpretation of Woolf's androgyny is a very gender conscious one. What Showalter presents is a choice between the masculine and the feminine; no matter what the choice is, it is understood as taking a side and eliminating the other. Viewed as an issue about taking up sides, it is understandable that Showalter is convinced that staying androgynous is difficult. However, what happens if we try to approach the concept with more fluidity? What if androgyny means an open passage between the masculine and the feminine? Standing in between the two conflicting forces, as Showalter suggests, one cannot help but being vexed. Yet, this is not the case with Woolf's *Orlando*. Orlando is not caught between the two sexes or the different clothes put on her; contrarily, she plays with the idea of dressing:

She had, it seems, no difficulty in sustaining the different parts, for her sex changed far more frequently than those who have worn only one set of clothing can conceive; nor can there be any doubt that she reaped a twofold harvest by this device; the pleasures of life were increased and its experiences multiplied. For the probity of breeches she exchanged the seductiveness of petticoats and enjoyed the love of both sexes equally. (*OL*, 211)

Of course, it is debatable whether such fictional fantasy about sex can be applied to real life. However, Woolf decides not to define the fine line between the two sexes; instead she blurs and plays with our tendency to seek rigid categories. New possibilities for understanding sex and gender are the liberation she brings to her readers. She also wants her readers to think about whether, under the confinement of clothing, everyone experiences this oscillation between the two sexes; then what is the precise line that definitely separates men and women? If clothing is what constructs the boundaries between the two sexes, then Orlando somehow anticipates the liberation from it by autonomously going back and forth between different garments.

As much as the prominence of the gender aspect is brought into the scenario of Orlando's change of sex, Woolf's purpose in elaborating Coleridge's idea is just as

literary as it is political. Woolf has a clear discussion on androgyny in *A Room of One's Own*, in which she says: "the androgynous mind is resonant and porous; that it transmits emotion with impediment; that it is naturally creative, incandescent and undivided." (*AROO*, 128) In Woolf's reading, the figurative use of gender terms is replaced largely by literary terms; going back to Coleridge for answers, Woolf says that when "this fusion takes place... the mind is fully fertilized and uses all its faculties." (*AROO*, 128) As in Orlando's play of changing the outfit, the gender boundary is no longer impermeable. On the contrary, what Woolf had in mind is the free floating mobility of accessing the masculine and the feminine, figuratively speaking, sides of the mind. The male and female definition, as well as the private and the public, the mind and the physical, is the dualism that Woolf wishes to disarm.

Towards the end of the novel, the biographer's task of writing Orlando's life becomes more difficult, because now the biographer needs to tackle the problem of locating Orlando's self (or, selves). Orlando is not composed of only one self, for "she had a great variety of selves to call upon, far more than we have been able to find room for, since a biography is considered complete if it merely accounts for six or seven, whereas a person may well have as many thousands" (*OL*, 295). Is a complete biography the same as a truthful biography? And, among these many possible selves, which are those that should be put into a biography? These are questions waiting to be answered, and Woolf does not give answers. Instead, she says "the ones [Orlando] needed the most kept aloof" (*OL*, 295), suggesting the impossibility of closing down the writing of a life because the most desirable subject is always beyond capture. This is not the original sin of biography, but is the ultimate question of life and subjectivity. If we look back at Woolf's criticism of the Victorian biographies, it is clear that what Woolf is opposed to is the idea that considers life to be flat, monotonous, and rigid. For her, the life of an individual is always open, flexible and fluent and it is this which

constitutes the uniqueness of any subject: if society seeks to close down and consummate our identities, Woolf the writer will endeavour to keep them open to new horizons. Orlando is a character that Woolf creates in order to embody all these possibilities in every aspect of life and to “challenge the readers’ expectations of how they ‘know’ and understand a life: through dates and events, in other words through accuracy and transparency.”<sup>154</sup> With so many facets to and possibilities of a life, absolute accuracy and transparency do not seem easily accessible. Interestingly, Woolf’s anxiety about pinning down her subject in writing was also the focus of an essay by a later writer and admirer of Woolf. The novelist Doris Lessing in her ‘Writing Autobiography’ argues: “The reason why people feel uneasy and disturbed when their lives are put into biographies is precisely because something that is experienced as fluid, fleeting, evanescent, has become fixed, and therefore lifeless, without movement.”<sup>155</sup> The fear of putting someone ‘dead’ in a biography throws light on Woolf’s meditations and her choice of genre. With a fictional biography, Woolf also examines the idea of ‘realness’ in biographies. McIntire suggests that “[f]ictionality, historicity, and truth alternately bespeak real—a real which Woolf is showing us needs to be articulated under varying guises, genres, and discursive tools to be true to the memory of its own nuances” (129).

### Woolf and the “Captain Self”

Woolf’s arguments about biographical writing are most pronounced in her novels; with the play of an interchangeable gender identity, she also shows how the self is influenced by the great social surrounding in a larger picture. The novel starts in the Elizabethan

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<sup>154</sup> Anna Snaith, “Representing Women’s Lives” from *Virginia Woolf: Public and Private Negotiations* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2000), 52.

<sup>155</sup> Doris Lessing, “Writing Autobiography” in *The Arts and Sciences of Criticism*, edited by David Fuller and Patricia Waugh (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1999), 154.

Age, followed by the Great Frost, the Age of Reason and moves on to the Victorian age and finally ends at what is indicated as the present moment in 1928. Every age has its unique spirit, and each age casts influences upon Orlando making him immersed in different ‘spirit(s) of the age’. At the opening of the story, the young Orlando swung his blade in the Elizabethan Age, the age of poetry and drama, in which “what the poets said in rhyme, the young translated into practice.” (*OL*, 27) Orlando’s love affair with the Russian princesses is similarly presented as violent and melodramatic. Orlando “was young; he was boyish; he did but as nature bade him to.” (*OL*, 27) Following that, Orlando becomes an ambassador and spends a long time living in an eastern country. After Orlando’s sex-change, s/he then decides to leave and to live among the gypsies. The life with the gypsies gives her another taste of freedom, especially with the gender-neutral Turkish trousers that impose and reveal nothing about gender identity. Understanding the difference between the gypsies and her own self, Orlando ends her wandering life and returns back to England.

As an English lady entering the Age of Reason, Orlando attends parties and social gatherings as all women of her class. She also arranges tea parties or salons, inviting great writers such as Alexander Pope; interestingly, Pope’s famous mock-heroic poem “The Rape of the Lock” is also parodied by the ridiculous affairs between Orlando and the Archduke. Accompanying Pope on the way home and overwhelmed by the pleasure of his company, however, the bigger question that remains for her concerns not only the vanity of being with a great writer, but something that transcends her situation. She questions “What’s an ‘age’ indeed? What are ‘we’?” (*OL*, 196) Woolf’s question points out the tug-of-war relationship between society and the individual, in which one’s identity is constantly washed by his or her age.

Orlando is uncertain about the relation between her being and the world around her; she has been through eras and has somehow been seemingly shaped by the age.



Orlando gets married in the Victorian Age, where damp, like the all-surrounding social expectation, permeates into every corner of life, after the clear and crisp eighteenth century when women are given the freedom and status to talk to great men over the same table. Woolf presents the eighteenth century as a time when women influenced the public sphere and mingled with writers and were allowed to be intellectual: in the nineteenth century, by contrast, they are confined to the home and to domestic chores and become the “angel in the house” castigated in *Three Guineas*. By the end of the novel, however, and with the dawning of the modern age, further possibilities of liberation again open up as Orlando shops at department stores, moving freely around in motor cars, telephones friends and travels alone without a male company. Orlando is in a world of fewer confinements and more liberties, as symbolised by the man and woman entering the taxi on equal terms at the end of *A Room of One's Own*.

In each age, Orlando acts differently as the various influences of the age bear down on her. The story ends in the fast moving modern world at the 1920s. The fast movement of everything separates it from previous ages, so as in her assertion that in 1910, human character changed; the modern age seems radically different from the past and the question is raised whether a new self has been born. It is chaotic, roaring and restless. Yet all the possibilities seem to open up in front of Orlando, even though these possibilities are very often accompanied by uncertainties and anxieties. As she drives, all fragmentary traces of thoughts emerge; Orlando's mind has now been occupied by a modern stream of consciousness. Movement in the new age brings new outlooks on life. As De Quincey describes in *The English Mail-Coach*, the fast moving vehicles lead to a new exploration of one's being.

The certain and stable self of Orlando splits into countless selves, and it takes all these fragments to know the true Orlando as Lily Briscoe says that one needs more than fifty pairs of eyes to see with. Orlando herself seeks the “Captain self” which

commands and locks up all the rest; she questions her identity as the person she is: “What then? Who then? ...Thirty-six; in a motor car; a woman. Yes, but a million other things as well.” (*OL*, 296) It is not the first time that the question of what constitutes Orlando becomes a concern. At the beginning of the novel, the biographer wrote “the fashion of the time did something to disguise it” (*OL*, 13). What has been disguised is not only Orlando’s gender, age, position, but, as Orlando admits, many other things as well; and they are always covered by fashions, decorum, expectations and what each historical era imposes on her. The biographer finds it difficult to write the life of Orlando not merely because “all took place in [Orlando’s] spirit,” but also because it is impossible for the biographer to define and write of what the ‘Key self’ is. All through Orlando’s life, to name the very vague thing that remains the same is not easy, but the Oak Tree, the poem or the tree itself, stays with Orlando through everything. Woolf finds a correlation between the life of Orlando with the growing of a tree and the composition of a poem. What, then, is life? Does life begin with an unknown seed like a tree, and gradually and slowly grow into something of a clearer shape on itself like the poem? Through *Orlando*, Woolf communicates her ideas on writing a person and his/her life. But, for Woolf, what is the person like and what is his/her life like then? There is no way to give a precise answer to this question, just as the poem, “The Oak Tree,” must remain mysterious for its readers, though, Woolf does attempt to picture a vague idea of life. With this experimental biography, Woolf attempts to challenge and break through old conventions, which suffocate the subject and dull the readers.

Breaking the conventions is significant and powerful enough to topple the given entity of self and to see the uniqueness of every individual. The biographer of Orlando said his/her “simple duty is to state the facts as far as they are known, and so let the reader make of them what he may” (*OL*, 63); readers are urged to feel, to think and to imagine the life of Orlando. The formation of one’s life is similar to the formation of a

fiction, which depends so much on unexpectedness and imagination as well as on convention. Putting to the test this new dialectical relationship between biography and identity, *Orlando* makes it clear to us that realistic verisimilitude is not enough to accommodate a lively life which defies any rules or categories.

### Autobiography and the Novel

Orlando's biographer keeps questioning not only the number but the nature of Orlando's self; the unstable self reflects Woolf's own sense of self, or, as Lee suggests, her "great variety of selves." (Lee, 529) The instability of self is presented in *Orlando* as freed from social and historical constraints and conventions. Lee observes that it is in the life of Orlando that Woolf experiences a freedom from parents, marriage, and mortality. Only "in *Orlando* and *A Room of One's Own* does Virginia Woolf free herself, through the idea of a woman's writing, from the pressure of the family, the doom of fate, the prison of madness." (Lee, 527-9) If the oak tree is what lies at the centre of Orlando's unstable life, then the tree is also there to show Woolf's views about the importance of literature in life-writing. In fact, when Woolf proposed that life-writing should consist of the granite-like truth and the rainbow-like personality, the distinction between truth, personality and life is never clear and definite. In fact, when Woolf saw the literary emphasis shift from poetry to prose, she claimed such transition had equal impact on the question of the relationship between art and life, literature and experience. The ultimate outcome of this transition is, Gualtieri concludes, "to turn the self into an art form".<sup>156</sup> Therefore, the distinction between writing one's life and representing art becomes almost the same question. Or, at least, we can argue, Woolf wishes to tackle the two with the same literary means. Woolf constantly insists that life-writing, in the

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<sup>156</sup> Elena Gualtieri, *Virginia Woolf's Essay* (London: MacMillan, 2000), 56.

same way as modern fictions, should direct its emphasis on depicting the character to let the personality shine with “the artistry of fiction.” (*GR*, 152) She even convincingly suggests “the life which is increasingly real to us is the fictitious life; it dwells in the personality rather than in the act.” (*GR*, 155) She wants the art of biography to have the same attributes as modern fictions—“the intensity of poetry”, “the excitement of drama”, the “suggestive reality” and the “proper creativeness.” (*DM*, 122)

Applying similar terms and expectations, Woolf’s ideas on life-writing grow together with her idea on modern fiction to such an extent that it is possible to see life-writing and fiction are two sides of the same coin. The intertwined relation between autobiography and the novel is even more inseparable. Woolf reflects on the writing of *The Waves* and says: “only autobiography is literature—novels are what we peel off, and come at last to the core, which is only you or me.”<sup>157</sup> What Woolf was trying to articulate is the inseparable relationship between herself and her writings; even though fictions are not her autobiographies, they are the necessary skin which covers and protects the discovery of the fragile self. Her life is within literature, or we might even say, her life is constructed by and alongside literature. In Woolf’s reading of De Quincey’s autobiographical writing, she values De Quincey’s understanding that autobiography is “not only of the external life but of the deeper and more hidden emotions.” (*CR II*, 135-6) However, Woolf is excited about De Quincey’s autobiography not because of his factual report of the life, but because his poetic prose serves no other purpose than a pure transmission of feeling and sensations. Oddly enough, one does not even need to make “a voyage of discovery into the psychology of the writer” in order to “draw all our pleasure from the words themselves.” (*CR II*, 132). De Quincey’s autobiography provides pure literary aesthetics and pleasures with little

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<sup>157</sup> Virginia Woolf, *The Letters of Virginia Woolf*, ed. Nigel Nicolson and Joanne Trautmann, Vol. 5, 2687 (London: Harcourt, 1979) p. 142. To Hugh Walpole, 28 Dec 1932.

“practical end in view”, and this is what gives the passages in his autobiography a feeling of disinterested “stillness and completeness.” (*CR II*, 133)

De Quincey’s mastery in autobiography lies in devising “some means by which the two levels of existence can be recorded—the rapid passage of events and actions; the slow opening up of single and solemn moments of concentrated emotions.” (*CR II*, 139) De Quincey’s art of autobiography is the coalescence of granite and rainbow, and the marriage of novel and autobiography. For Woolf, De Quincey’s autobiography, as sketchy and fragmentary as it may be, delivers the high and pure pleasure of literary enjoyment, an ideal portrait of lives that Victorians did not aspire to. In Woolf’s reading of De Quincey’s autobiographies, the merit of De Quincey’s writing derives very much from his particular talents as a stylist of poetic prose. Without its capacity to “accommodate all sorts of odds and ends” and make room for unrelated and unessential “dust and twigs and flies” (*CR II*, 132), De Quincey’s autobiographical writing is capable of making Woolf feel that her sensations have been worked upon “as if by music—the senses are stirred rather than the brain.” (*CR II*, 133) Woolf more than once commented on De Quincey’s style of impassioned prose, and its power of depicting the mind and “its thoughts, its rhapsodies, its dream” (*GR*, 34). As “an exception and a solitary”, De Quincey uses the poetic imagination to create vivid visions that even “made life seem a little dull in comparison” (*GR*, 35). Because of the outstanding style of his prose writing, Woolf suggests that De Quincey escapes the predicaments of conventional prose fiction and makes himself the most suitable of all autobiographers: “He was a born autobiographer...For here it is fitting that he should stand a little apart, should look back, under cover of his raised hand, at scenes which had almost melted into the past.” (*GR*, 37) De Quincey’s literary style resolves the tension between fiction and fact in life-writing, because he manages to make “His enemy, the hard fact, [become] cloudlike and supple under his hands.” (*GR*, 37) The alchemy of De

Quincey's "prose poetry" (*GR*, 33) combines the writings of creative fictions and factual life to realise a balance between an imaginative conjuring power and the acquaintance with what, Woolf understands, as an "an intimacy with the mind" (*GR*, 39).

The power of De Quincey's art manifests itself as "capable of being transfixed by the mysterious solemnity of certain emotions; of realizing how one moment may transcend in value fifty years." (*CR II*, 138) De Quincey's "charm and eloquence" takes Woolf on a journey when "suddenly the smooth narrative parts sunder, arch opens by arch, the vision of something for ever flying, for ever escaping, is revealed, and time stands still." (*CR II*, 139) This is the spell of De Quincey's autobiographical writing; in these moments, De Quincey makes the transient still and the still aloof. It is also in these moments that De Quincey's style masters the art of recording the life of fact and the life of personality. De Quincey's capture and depiction of the moments demonstrate what Woolf has in mind—a balanced fusion of opposing ends. Woolf admires De Quincey's art of autobiography and analyses her sensational responses; she states that De Quincey's readers are skilfully made to "fathom and explore the depths of that single emotion" (*CR II*, 134) and are "put in possession of a meaning of that complex kind which is largely a sensation." (*CR II*, 134)

### Sketch of the Past

In Woolf's own autobiographies, she examines and exercises her own reflections upon life-writing. Woolf comments on how the moments preserved in De Quincey's autobiographies echo her own autobiographical focus in "Sketch of the Past":

I often wonder—the things we have felt with great intensity have an existence independent of our mind; are in fact still in existence?...I see it—the past—as an avenue lying behind...There at the end of the avenue still, are the garden and the nursery. (*MB*, 81)

In her own writing of herself, the moments are elaborated. Past, future, memory and emotions are all condensed in a single droplet, and it is through retrospective writing that Woolf is able to properly lay her eyes on these moments. She says in the diary that “I can only note that the past is beautiful because one never realises an emotion at the time. It expands later, & thus we don’t have complete emotions about the present, only about the past.” (*WD*, 70) For Woolf, the present is constructed by the past; however, paradoxically, the past could only be comprehended in the present. In the whole act of rationalisation and realisation of the past, writing plays an important part. It is a recording of the past, and at the same time, a creation of the present. As McCracken points out, the question of how Woolf represents the self always involves her fictional incorporation of the self. McCracken argues that in Woolf’s discussion of how closely linked her real-life experience and her imaginary creation is, any stable sense of real self always inevitably “drops” from consideration and slips away.<sup>158</sup>

In “Sketch of the Past”, Woolf writes about herself and it is in her writing of the self that we can see many of her ideas on life-writing coming into play. As an enthusiastic reader of life-writing, there are a “number of different ways in which memoirs can be written.” (*MB*, 78) Following Woolf’s long emphasis on the unity of fact and fiction, she wants life-writings to cover the two aspects of life—the outer events and the inner emotions. She often wondered “that things we have felt with great intensity have an existence independent of our minds” and should “in fact still in existence”. (*MB*, 81) The feeling of the emotions is so strong that it makes the absent “more real than the present moment.” (*MB*, 80) This emotional experience, Woolf says, “must leave its trace; and it is only a question of discovering how we can get ourselves again attached to it, so that we shall be able to live our lives through from

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<sup>158</sup> LuAnn McCracken, “‘The Synthesis of My Being’: Autobiography and the Reproduction of Identity in Virginia Woolf”, *Tulsa’s Study in Women’s Literature*, Vol. 9 (1990): 59.

the start.” (*MB*, 81) The past haunts Woolf in the same way as it haunts Mrs. Hilbery; it stands as the foundation of her sense of self and is the medium through which Woolf believes she, as an individual, could compose herself. If the imprint left by the past shows a sense of individuality, then Woolf has pointed out what life-writing should be about lest it repeat the faults of Victorian biographies. From an autobiographer’s point of view, Woolf thinks it is significant to tap into the purely subjective aspects of experience in order to deliver a genuine kind of life-writing. One of the memoir writer’s difficulties is that “They leave out the person to whom things happened.” The reason for doing so is that it is “it is so difficult to describe any human being.” Therefore, memoir writers might say: “This is what happened”; but they do not say what the person was like to whom it happened. And the events mean very little unless we know first to whom they happened.” (*MB*, 79)

In the essay on De Quincey’s autobiography, Woolf claims De Quincey had the internal haze and the external event “beautifully... combined” and thus had changed the art of autobiographer ever since. But the importance of the personal and internal side of the subject is not necessarily of greater importance than the outer events in the case of life-writing. Woolf’s emphasis on “moments of being” does not try to establish a biased dualism against the external world. Seeing herself as “a fish in a stream; deflected; held in place” (*MB*, 92), Woolf admits dualism in her life. But instead of trying to denying such dichotomy, she says: “The real novelist can somehow convey both sorts of being” (*MB*, 84)—the moments of being and non-being; the personal and the public. As prejudice is displayed if memoir writers only “collect a number of events, and leave the person to whom it happened unknown” (*MB*, 83), so it is just as biased not to consider what the great surrounding does to the subject. Similar to Orlando’s continuing journey through different historical eras and ages, Woolf constantly reminds us of the “immense forces society brings to play upon each of us”.



(MB, 92) It would not be a complete understanding of life “if we cannot analyse these invisible presences”, in which case life-writing could become futile and “we know very little of the subject of the memoir”. (MB, 92)

Paul de Man argues that autobiography is an impossible mission because autobiographers only distract themselves when the writing self and the written self are clearly segregated and distanced in the act of writing. It might be difficult to write a story of the self, but in the same way as reading de Man’s critical theory as his masked self projections, the problem becomes an easier one if we look for Woolf’s selves in her fictions. De Man’s point is valid in saying everything is autobiographical; Woolf would admit this too. Famously, she says that the writing of *To the Lighthouse* did for her the tricks of psychoanalysis. When *To the Lighthouse* was written, Woolf says: “I ceased to be obsessed by my mother. I no longer hear her voice; I do not see her.” (MB, 93) Through and in writing, she says: “I expressed some very long felt and deeply felt emotions. And in expressing it, I explained it and then laid it to rest.” (MB, 93) If Woolf’s fictional writing serves such an intimate function of analysing the self, the distance between her autobiographical self and the creative persona could not be too far apart.

Woolf is always haunted by the past; the memories of her life support the writing of “Sketch of the Past”. But past and memory are non-existence if no one remembers them. Memory, Woolf says, “is much affected by the present moment. What I write today I should not write in a year’s time.” (MB, 87) The vulnerability of memory is inherent in the nature of it; Woolf questions the credibility of it and says: “there is nothing to check that memory by; nothing to bring it to ground with.” (MB, 96) Memory is the heritage of the past, but it is the product of the present. Therefore, where memory ends, fiction begins. Life-writing is at the joint attaching memory and fiction. Though the fine line between art and life is even more blurred for Woolf,

treating both art and life with writing gives Woolf insights and possible solutions to the whole question of life-writing. Woolf writes these moments in life by creating scenes that are capable of delivering the combination of personality and events; in doing so, Woolf gains the autonomy entitled to the privileged writer.

I find that scene making is my natural way of marking the past. A scene always comes to the top; arranged; representative. This confirms me in my instinctive notion—it is irrational; it will not stand argument—that we are sealed vessels afloat upon what it is convenient to call reality. (*MB*, 145)

This ability of scene making, Woolf suggests, might be the origin of her writing impulse (*MB*, 145). Writing becomes the resort of Woolf in her quest for the larger questions in life; it leads her to finding the patterns behind the cotton wool of non-being. Though the value and joy of writing “has never been much discussed” and often “is left out in almost all biographies and autobiographies, even of artists” (*MB*, 86), writing, Woolf feels, “is far more necessary than anything else” because it reveals the tangled question of modern life and helps Woolf to probe into the relations between individual life and the surrounding society:

[Writing] is the strongest pleasure known to me. It is the rapture I get when in writing I seem to be discovering what belongs to what; making a scene come right; making a character come together. From this I reach what I might call a philosophy; at any rate it is a constant idea of mine; that behind the cotton wool is hidden a pattern; that we—I mean all human beings—are connected with this; that the whole world is a work of art; that we are part of the work of art. (*MB*, 85)

Being a writer, both in her novels and autobiographies, Woolf’s attempt at defining who she is always coincides with her stronger interest in trying new ideas and broadening horizons in her novels. Writing is her tool, and perhaps her answer as well, which leads her to the epiphany of herself and a revelation about all selves: “certainly and emphatically there is no God; we are the words; we are the music; we are the thing itself.” (*MB*, 85)

## Conclusion

The thesis sets out to investigate the literary relationship between De Quincey and Woolf and fulfils its goal of reconnecting the dialogic relationship between the two writers on aspects of writing the self. Though the aim of the thesis is to examine a literary influence, in which De Quincey's Romantic background passes down to Woolf, the thesis has to be, and inevitably is, a comparative study of the two writers at the same time. In order to detect and trace the influences De Quincey bequeaths to Woolf, similar ideas on related topics of both writers are juxtaposed to present the picture.

The debate of the self lies in the centre of the thesis; the self is examined from three perspectives in order to elucidate the idea of the self against suitable aesthetic, philosophical and literary backgrounds. Though the three-part structure of the thesis is organised roughly according to Woolf's literary career, there is also an intellectual purpose in developing the argument in such an order. The incremental logic of the thesis begins with a wide-angled lens which looks at both writers' aesthetic ideas on literature and its power, followed by a further inquiry into the relationship between the sense of time and self, and finally employs a focused lens inspecting how autobiographical writings reflect and represent both writers' concepts of the self.

It is important to point out that the chapters on De Quincey and the broader Romantic background appear to be more discursive and dialectic, while chapters on Woolf present a digested argument and textual analysis. There are two reasons for this. Firstly, this reflects the different critical approaches the two eras adopt. Romanticism attracts attention from deconstructionism, such as the studies of Paul de Man. The capitalised concept of Romanticism contains different threads of thinking and awaits theoretical decentralisation to reveal the complexity of the Romantic period. However, a dispersed ideology of Romanticism is already embedded in Woolf's thinking and

writings. It is in the nature of any study which traces the influence of one writer upon another to look at a wider picture before narrowing in and pinpointing the argument. The thesis has observed various Romantic writers in order to identify a shared thought, which is adopted and applied in Woolf's novels.

Following the design of the thesis, the first section is devoted to looking at both writers' aesthetic emphasis. De Quincey's formula of the literature of power and the literature of knowledge is his best-known literary theory. Fragmented and sketchy De Quincey's elaboration may be, according to his sceptics, but it is nonetheless fruitful to read De Quincey alongside his Romantic peers. Both Wordsworth and Coleridge have strong personal and literary connections with De Quincey and being the two most admired poets of De Quincey's, it is necessary to examine their literary influence upon the development of De Quincey's own literary achievements. Meanwhile, Shelley's *A Defence of Poetry* was written at the year when De Quincey's *Confessions* was published in 1821; though De Quincey's work was not well known by the public, his positive awareness of, and even acquaintance with, Shelley's literary ideas makes *A Defence of Poetry* suitable material for comparison. Informed by Shelley, the thesis succeeds in demonstrating how De Quincey's literature of power as fine art demonstrates a causal relationship with the sublimation of humanity. This power of literature diminishes the vulgar difference between prose and poetry; as an innate strength of literature, the power can be asserted in any form of fine art.

Finding her Victorian forefathers too close and too overwhelming, Woolf's acknowledged open-mindedness towards the Romantics could be considered as a revolt against Victorian models. Woolf's active reading of De Quincey displays admiration as well as reminiscence, which confirms that De Quincey's literary influence is beyond a mere sense of affinity in style and ideas. Supported by Woolf's essays on De Quincey, it is clear that the most important contribution of De Quincey's criticism and practice is

his impassioned prose—prose with the elevated sublimity of poetry. This style of prose writing delivers more than trivial businesses of mundane day-to-day events and therefore poetic prose becomes the adequate tool for Woolf's Modernist novels. Poetic prose makes Woolf's ambition of establishing a proper status of fiction writing probable. With the help of De Quincey's stylistic impassioned prose, the literature of power manifests itself in Woolf's depiction of human intimacy with the unifying harmony of poetics. However, it is also recognised in the thesis that among the same literary inclinations, the two writers have different considerations regarding creative writing. As an essayist, De Quincey's writings appear to be more spontaneous in style than those of Woolf. Though De Quincey displays a magnificent imaginative power, his fault is verbosity, as suggested by Woolf. Understandably, Woolf makes her comment from a novelist's point of view. For a novelist, the structural balance and integrity of the novel is equally important as the descriptive power of the language used. Woolf's career as a novelist gives her a different stance to evaluate De Quincey's prosaic journal publications.

In the third chapter, the thesis observes the sense of time in De Quincey. Time and self are inseparable in Romantic writings. When St. Augustine writes about time in his *Confessions*, time still resides in the realm of God. God is eternity and God is therefore the definition of time. Yet, a humanised sense of time could not comprehend immortality; human time is conditioned by the sense of boundaries, the beginning and the end. Therefore, time is gradually detached from God, from nature and from the dominance of ticking clocks for the Romantics. In De Quincey, time is a personal sense of the world. Often it is associated with his extraordinary experience of opium-taking, mail-coach riding, and dreaming. These experiences have a single nodal point: the human mind. De Quincey represents his sense of time as it is perceived by his mind. By emphasising the psychological time, the gap between the internal and external

definition of time is officially announced.

Time in the Modernist period is even more disintegrated and unstable, and Woolf responds to such a changing society with something De Quincey has ventured in before—the world of human psychology. In Woolf's depiction of time, the scale is expanded: the layers of time are doubled and their complexity is multiplied. Her novels often tell the story when external and internal time, patriarchal and feminine time, realist and artistic time are juxtaposed. The challenge for Woolf is no longer to present the multiplicity of time, but the coexistence of it. Such dichotomies are embodied in *To the Lighthouse*, in which the world has various faces but is contracted into the representation of life. Art is proposed by Woolf to be the medium for capturing and representing modern life—the final brush stroke of Lily Briscoe summarises art, time, woman and the ineffable life in a single flash of epiphany.

The chapters on art and time in relation to the self lay the ground for the last section, in which theory is put to practice and to test. De Quincey's autobiographical attempt involves theoretical clarification and Paul de Man's deconstructionist argument helps to shed light on the fundamental tension between historical and artistic dilemma regarding self-writing. Following the arguments made in previous chapters, self-writing encounters the situation in which the self is split between two narratives—the grand narrative of the macrocosmic and the personal narrative of the microcosmic. Although De Quincey's writings tend to bias towards the internal interpretation, it is careless to overlook a suggested dilemma he points out in the genre of life-writing and the knowledge of self. De Quincey's writings, unlike the assuring depiction of Wordsworth's growth of the mind in *The Prelude*, indicate a systematic being of the mind. Writing in order to fulfill the process of becoming, in Nietzsche's term, is inseparable from seeing the journey of becoming as the status quo of being. This is not only supported by modern neurology but is also inherited by Woolf where it

is further developed.

De Quincey is a known autobiographer and he writes constantly about himself. He is never too reserved to admit that his reminiscences and biographies are personal reflections of his subjects. The stories of others are also the stories of his own. Woolf is rather shy when it comes to writing about herself. Her ideas of life-writing are hidden in her essays, reviews, and her fictional writings. She appears to be more at ease when her ideas of life-writing are presented in a critical or creative voice. Yet, following her career and investigating the development of her ideas leads to the realisation that Woolf has also incorporated her life in her writings and transformed her fictions as stories of her own. The dilemma that De Quincey proposes is resolved in Woolf: Woolf writes her life into art and makes art the presentation of her life. Historicity of one's life in one's time and artistic creation become the same thing. It is worth noting that in the reading of *Orlando*, women's time and its relationship to how women could construct a history of their own through writing is not only a gender-oriented issue. Rather than appreciating women's time from a feminist point of view, which may seem unrelated to De Quincey, it is important to remember De Quincey's eccentricity as a social outcast. De Quincey is never portrayed as a typical masculine male figure, whether in physical appearance or in temperament. Biographical evidence indicates that De Quincey was constantly bullied because of his failure to fulfill a masculine image. De Quincey's pursuit of intellectual improvement discards gender norms and transcends the social pressure to fulfill the gender expectation. His obsession with the potent mind demonstrates his acknowledgment of the androgynous achievement in the world of art.

The thesis makes its contribution to scholarship by paying close attention to a literary relationship which has been identified but never developed and by appreciating the topic as one which could contribute to the study of Romantic legacy shed on later generations. The study of Romantic legacies is a burgeoning field, and the focus on

literature after 1900 is an equally prominent one. However, due to the limits of time and scale, the thesis has to select its main paths and sacrifice other possible avenues of research. The purpose of this thesis is to bridge the overlooked relationship between De Quincey and Woolf and the broader Romantic legacies absorbed by Modernism, and therefore little discussion is devoted to Victorianism. However, it is also appreciated that Victorian writers such as Ruskin, Proust, Robert Browning and E. M. Forster could bring more intellectual debate to the thesis by filling the historical gap between Romanticism and Modernism. Similarly, the thesis could be more complete if the focus on the self expands and includes the social and political dimension during De Quincey's and Woolf's time. Evidently, both writers are immersed in a time when social changes accompany political movements. De Quincey is aware of the rivalry between *The London Magazine* and *Blackwood's Magazine* as well as the literary Cockney School poets including Shelley and Keats. Woolf, in the same way, talks about wars, deaths in the battlefields, and political liberations in her novels. Both writers' sense of self and their textual creations bear an indistinguishable influence imposed by the political narratives of their age. Given more time and opportunity, the thesis could approach the topic with a fuller scope and deeper understanding.



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